Buddhist Illogic

A Critical Analysis of Nagarjuna's Arguments



Avi Sion

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Avi Sion, Ph. D.

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ABSTRACT.

The 2nd Century CE Indian philosopher Nagarjuna founded the Madhyamika (Middle Way) school of Mahayana Buddhism, which strongly influenced Chinese (Ch'an), Korean (Sôn) and Japanese (Zen) Buddhism, as well as Tibetan Buddhism. Nagarjuna is regarded by many Buddhist writers to this day as a very important philosopher, who they claim definitively proved the futility of ordinary human cognitive means.

His writings include a series of arguments purporting to show the illogic of logic, the absurdity of reason. He considers this the way to verbalize and justify the Buddhist doctrine of "emptiness" (*Shunyata*). These arguments attack some of the basic tenets and techniques of reasoning, such as the laws of thought (identity, non-contradiction and the excluded middle), conceptualization and predication, our common assumptions of self, entities and essences, as well as our beliefs in motion and causation.

The present essay demonstrates the many sophistries involved in Nagarjuna's arguments. He uses double standards, applying or ignoring the laws of thought and other norms as convenient to his goals; he manipulates his readers, by giving seemingly logical form (like the dilemma) to his discourse, while in fact engaged in *non-sequiturs* or appealing to doubtful premises; he plays with words, relying

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on unclear terminology, misleading equivocations and unfair fixations of meaning; and he 'steals concepts', using them to deny the very percepts on which they are based.

Although a critique of the Madhyamika philosophical interpretation and defense of "emptiness", *Buddhist Illogic* is not intended to dissuade readers from Buddhism. On the contrary, its aim to enhance personal awareness of actual cognitive processes, and so improve meditation. It is also an excellent primer on phenomenological epistemology.

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Foreword.

This essay is a critical review of some of the main arguments proposed by the Indian Buddhist philosopher **Nagarjuna** (c. 113-213 CE), founder of the **Madhyamika** (Middle Way) school, one of the Mahayana streams, which strongly influenced Chinese (Ch'an), Korean (Sôn) and Japanese (Zen) Buddhism, as well as Tibetan Buddhism. Specifically, the text referred to here is ***Empty Logic*** - *Madhyamika Buddhism from Chinese Sources* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991) by Hsueh-li Cheng, of Hawaii University (Hilo). The main source-texts of this school of thought, to which Cheng of course often refers, are the "three treatises" – the *Middle Treatise*, the *Twelve Gate Treatise* and the *Hundred Treatise*.[1]

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[1] Here abbreviated to MT, TGT and HT, respectively. These texts are not all by Nagarjuna and no longer exist in the Sanskrit original, but in Chinese translation (by Kumarajiva, dating from 409 CE). Thus, the main verses of the first treatise (MT) were by Nagarjuna; its commentaries were by Pingala. The whole second treatise (TGT) was by Nagarjuna. The third treatise's (HT) main verses were by Aryadeva and its commentaries were by Vasu. I shall be content to refer to Cheng, mentioning his occasional

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The title *Empty Logic* was not intended pejoratively by its author, but simply to mean 'logic of emptiness', the term "emptiness" (*Shunyata*) referring to the Buddhist doctrine that (briefly put, very roughly) things have no abiding core, no essence, no fixed nature. Cheng's work is a clear exposition of Madhyamika history and logical techniques, but it makes no attempt to criticize those techniques. All criticism of Madhyamika or Buddhist logic, here, is my own.

The present essay is not a religious tract and has no polemical intent. It is a work of philosophy, a fair-minded logical evaluation of certain propositions and arguments taken as philosophical positions open to discussion like any other. It examines and discusses a goodly array of Buddhist, and in particular Madhyamika, doctrines, but does not pretend to be an exhaustive treatment of all doctrines or of all aspects of those dealt with.

However, I do not attempt here to develop a historical perspective, or to list the various tendencies and their interrelations. Cheng's book includes an interesting

references these treatises; but, in view of Cheng's evident competence, I shall barely distinguish between his say-so and his rare word-for-word quotations of Nagarjuna.

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exposition of the development of Madhyamika philosophy, from Nagarjuna in the 2nd century CE through to the Yogachara school and on. However, he fails to investigate in sufficient detail the development of Buddhist philosophy prior to Nagarjuna, barely mentioning several centuries of earlier Theravada (Hinayana) philosophy and the early phases (starting 1st cent. CE, and before) of Mahayana reaction (e.g. the Mahasanghikas)[2]. To better understand Nagarjuna's motives and goals, it would be well to be acquainted with this background[3].

My naming the present essay *Buddhist Illogic* should not be taken to imply that I consider all Buddhist philosophy or even

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[2] Mahayana means 'great vehicle', Hinayana means 'small vehicle'. The latter may be taken as a pejorative term coined by the Mahayanists, implying that their interpretation of Buddhism is superior. The alternative label, Theravada, is preferable. In my view, Mahayana was in many respects a more revolutionary than evolutionary development.

[3] A text I can recommend is Part I of *The Diamond Sutra* by Mu Soeng (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2000). It is also very instructive to look at the development of Buddhism from a point of view of comparative religion. For instance, the Mahayana argument "that their sutras needed to be kept secret for five hundred years" (p. 24) is familiar to students of Judaism (a similar argument is used there, e.g. to explain the historically late appearance of the 'Ashuri' Hebrew script used in Torah scrolls, and in other contexts).

all Madhyamika as illogical. It merely reflects my focus here on some of the (many) illogical arguments used in Nagarjuna's discourse. Indeed, some of Nagarjuna's arguments and beliefs have been refuted or rejected by other Buddhist philosophers. Buddhist philosophy is not monolithic, but a constellation of philosophies with as their common ground the (alleged) pronouncements of Buddhism's founder. I do here challenge some underlying Buddhist doctrines, but only incidentally, not systematically.

I would have named this essay less pejoratively 'Buddhist Logic' if I had found some interesting new thought forms to report. Buddhism and Nagarjuna do indeed use valid as well as invalid forms of reasoning, but these forms (those I found so far) are all familiar to us today, and so not notable except for historical purposes (where we would try and determine whether Buddhist usage antedates usage in Greek or other writings). However, my main justification is that much of Buddhism itself, and particularly Nagarjuna's version of it, cheerfully proclaims itself free of or beyond logic, or illogical and even anti-logical.

On a personal note, I want to stress my admiration for Buddhism in general, which has taught me much, both in the

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way of living skills and through its philosophical insights. So I cannot be accused of approaching this subject with any antagonistic prejudice. I read *Empty Logic* eager to learn from it, rather than to find fault with it. As a philosopher and logician I am however duty bound to analyze and judge philosophies dispassionately, and this is what I do here. Generally speaking, I have little interest in criticizing other people's philosophical works, because I could write thick volumes doing so. Life is unfortunately too short for that, so I prefer to pass it developing a constructive statement. Nevertheless, one generally learns a lot through debate, and I can say that challenging Nagarjuna has helped me to clarify various philosophical problems and possible solutions.

Finally, let me say that the message of "Buddha" (the enlightened) Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 BCE), about "emptiness", which as is well known is essentially non-verbal, should not be confused with Nagarjuna's or any other writer's attempted philosophical interpretation, explanation and justification of related ideas. Thus, to refute the latter does not necessarily deny the former.

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1. The tetralemma.

Western philosophical and scientific thought is based on Aristotelian logic, whose founding principles are the three "Laws of Thought". These can be briefly stated as "A is A" (Identity), "Nothing is both A and non-A" (Non-contradiction) and "Nothing is neither A nor non-A" (Exclusion of the Middle). These are not claimed as mere hypotheses, note well, but as incontrovertible premises of all rational human thought[4].

Religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, even while adhering to these laws in much of their discourse and paying lip-service to them, in their bids to interpret their own sacred texts and to make their doctrines seem reasonable to their converts, have often ignored these same laws. This is especially true of mystical trends within these religions, but many examples could be given from mainstream writings.

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[4] See my *Future Logic* (Geneva: Author, 1996. Rev. ed.), ch. 2 and 20, and later essays on the subject (published on my website www.thelogician.net).

The same can be said of some aspects of Buddhist philosophy.

The *tetralemma*[5] is a derivative of the laws of thought, with reference to any two terms or propositions, labeled A and B, and their opposites non-A and non-B. Four combinations of these four terms are conceivable, namely "A and B" (both), "non-A and non-B" (neither), "A and non-B" and "non-A and B" (one or the other only). According to Aristotelian logic, these four statements are incompatible with each other (*only one of them can be true*, because if two or more were affirmed then "A and non-A" or "B and non-B" or both would be true, and the latter implications are self-contradictory) and exhaustive (*at least one of them must be true*, since if they were all denied then "not A and not non-A" or "not B and not non-B" or both would be true, and the latter implications go against the excluded middle).

Now, what Nagarjuna does is insert the term A in place of B (i.e. he takes the case of B = A), and effectively claim that the above four logical possibilities of combination apply in that

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5 See Cheng, pp. 36-38, on this topic. He there refers to MT opening statement, as well as XVII:12a and XXIII:1a. Etym. Gk. *tetra* = four, *lemma* = alternatives. Term coined in contrast to the dilemma "A or non-A".

special case – so that “A and A (=B)”, “non-A and non-A (=non-B)”, “A and non-A (=non-B)”, “non-A and A (=B)” seem logically acceptable. **He then goes on to argue that there are four existential possibilities: affirmation of A (A + A = A), denial of A (non-A + non-A = non-A), both affirmation and denial of A (A and non-A) and neither affirmation nor denial of A (not A and not non-A).** He is thus apparently using the principles and terminology of common logic to arrive at a very opposite result. This gives him and readers the impression that it is quite reasonable to both affirm and deny or to neither affirm nor deny.

But in Aristotelian logic, the latter two alternatives are at the outset excluded – “both A and non-A” by the Law of Non-contradiction and “neither A nor non-A” by the Law of the Excluded-Middle – and the only logical possibilities left are “A” or “non-A”. The anti-Aristotelian position may be viewed, in a positive light, as an anti-Nominalist position, reminding us that things are never quite what they seem or that things cannot be precisely classified or labeled. But ultimately, they intend the death of Logic; for without the laws of thought, how are we to distinguish between true and false judgments?

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The law of identity "A is A" is a conviction that things have some identity (whatever it specifically be) rather than another, or than no identity at all. It is an affirmation that knowledge is ultimately possible, and a rejection of sheer relativism or obscurantism. Nagarjuna's goal is to deny identity.

It should be noted here that Aristotle is very precise in his formulation of the law of contradiction, stating in his *Metaphysics* "The same attribute cannot *at the same time* belong and not belong *to the same subject in the same respect*" (italics mine). Thus, an alternative statement of the laws of thought would be the 'trilemma' (let us so call it) "*either wholly A, or wholly non-A, or both partly A and partly non-A*", which excludes the fourth alternative "both wholly A and wholly non-A". The Buddhist attack on the laws of thought draws some of its credibility from the fact that people subconsciously refer to this 'trilemma', thinking superficially that indeed opposite things may occur in the same place at different times or at the same time in different places or in various respects, without thereby giving rise to logical difficulty

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incapable of resolution. But it should be clear that the Buddhist position is much more radical than that, accepting thoroughgoing antinomy.

Similarly with regard to the law of the excluded middle, which affirms the situation "neither A nor non-A" to be impossible *in fact*. People are misled by the possibility of uncertainty *in knowledge*, as to whether A or non-A is the case in fact, into believing that this law of thought is open to debate. But it must be understood that the thrust of this logical rule is inductive, rather than deductive; i.e. it is a statement that *at the end* of the knowledge acquisition process, either "A" or "non-A" will result, and no third alternative can be expected. It does not exclude that *in the interim*, a situation of uncertainty may occur. Nagarjuna's position exploits this confusion in people's minds.

Nagarjuna interprets the limitation implied by the dilemma "A or non-A" as an arbitrary 'dualism' on the part of

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ordinary thinkers[6]. It only goes to show that he misunderstands formalization (or he pretends to, in an attempt to confuse gullible readers). When logicians use a variable like "B" and allow that "non-A and B" and "A and non-B" are both in principle possible, they do not intend that as a generality applicable to *all* values of B (such as "A"), but only as a generic statement applicable to *any consistent* values of B. In the specific case where B = A, the said two

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[6] It is misleading to call this a 'duality' or 'dichotomy', as Buddhists are wont to do, because it suggests that a unitary thing was arbitrarily cut into two – and incidentally, that it might just as well have been cut into four. But, on a perceptual level, there is no choice involved, and no 'cutting-up' of anything. A phenomenon appearing is *one single* thing, call it '**a**' (a proper name, or an indicative 'this'), and not a disjunction. The issue of 'dichotomy' arises only on a conceptual level. *Negation* is a rational act, i.e. we can only speak of 'non-**a**', of what does not appear, by first bringing to mind something '**a**', which previously appeared (in sensation or imagination). In *initial conceptualization*, two phenomena are compared and contrasted, to each other and to other things, in some respect(s); the issue is then, are they similar enough to each other and different enough from other things to be judged 'same' and labeled by a general term (say 'A'), or should they be judged 'different' or is there an uncertainty. At *the later stage of recognition*, we have to decide whether a third phenomenon fits in the class formed for the previous two (i.e. falls under 'A') or does not fit in (i.e. falls under 'non-A') or remains in doubt. In the latter case, we wonder whether it is 'A' or 'non-A', and forewarn that it cannot be both or neither.

combinations have to be eliminated because they are illegal (i.e. breach two of the laws of thought).

The above-stated property of symbols, i.e. their applicability only conditionally within the constraints of consistency, is evident throughout the science of formal logic, and it is here totally ignored by Nagarjuna. His motive of course was to verbalize and rationalize the Buddha's doctrine that the ultimate truth is beyond *nama* and *rupa*, name and form (i.e. discrimination and discourse), knowable only by a transcendental consciousness (the Twofold Truth doctrine). More precisely, as Cheng emphasizes, Nagarjuna's intent was to show that logic is inherently inconsistent and thus that reason is confused madness to be rejected. That is, he was (here and throughout) not ultimately trying to defend a tetralemma with B equal to A – or even to affirm that things are both A and non-A, or neither A nor non-A – but wished to get us to look altogether beyond the distinctions of conceptualization and the judgments of logic.

But as above shown he does not succeed in this quest. For his critique depends on a misrepresentation of logical science. He claims to show that logic is confused and self-contradictory, but in truth what he presents as the thesis of

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logical science is not what it claims for itself but precisely what it explicitly forbids. Furthermore, suppose logical theory did lead to contradictions as he claims, this fact would not lead us to its rejection were there not also a tacit appeal to our preference for the logical in practice. If logic were false, contradictions would be acceptable. Thus, funnily enough, Nagarjuna appeals to our logical habit in his very recommendation to us to ignore logic. In sum, though he gives the illusion that it is reasonable to abandon reason, it is easy to see that his conclusion is foregone and his means are faulty.

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2. Neither real nor unreal.

But Nagarjuna also conceives ultimate reality ("emptiness"[7]) as a "middle way" [8] – so that the world of experience is neither to be regarded as real, nor to be regarded as unreal ("there is nothing, neither mental nor non-mental, which is real" and it "cannot be conceived as unreal," reports Cheng). In this context, Nagarjuna is clearly relying on one of the above-mentioned logically impossible disjuncts, namely "neither A nor non-A" (be it said in passing). I want to now show why Nagarjuna's statement seems superficially reasonable and true.

As I have often clarified and explained[9], knowledge has to be regarded or approached phenomenologically (that is the only consistent epistemological thesis). We have to start by

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7 Beyond consciousness of "Shunyata" is a more vivid awareness called "Mahamudra", according to Chögyam Trungpa, in *Illusion's Game* (Shambhala: Boston, 1994). But such refinements need not concern us here.

8 See Cheng, pp. 38-39, on this topic. He there refers to MT XIII:9a and XVIII:7.

9 See my *Future Logic*, ch. 60-62, and later essays on the subject.

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acknowledging and observing *appearances*, as such, without initial judgment as to their reality or illusion. At first sight all appearances seem *real* enough. But after a while, we have to recognize that some appearances conflict with other appearances, and judge such appearances (i.e. one or more of those in conflict) as *illusory*. Since there is nothing in our 'world' but appearances, all remaining appearances not judged as illusions (i.e. so long as they are not logically invalidated by conflicts with other appearances) maintain their initial status as realities.

That is, the distinction between appearances as realities or illusions emerges within the world of appearances itself, merely classifying some this way and the rest that way. We have no concept of reality or illusion other than with reference to appearance. To use the category of reality with reference to something *beyond* appearance is concept stealing, a misuse of the concept, an extrapolation which ignores the concept's actual genesis in the context of appearance. To apply the concept of illusion to *all* appearances, on the basis that some appearances are illusions, is an unjustified generalization ignoring how this concept arises with reference to a specific event (namely,

inconsistency between certain appearances and resulting diminishment of their innate credibilities). Moreover, to claim that no appearances are real or that all are illusions is self-defeating, since such claim itself logically falls under the category of appearance.

The illusory exists even though it is not reality – it exists as appearance. The real is also apparent – some of it, at least. Therefore, appearance per se is neither to be understood as reality (since some appearances are illusory), nor can it be equated to illusion (since not all appearances have been or can be found illusory). Appearance is thus the *common ground* of realities and illusions, their common characteristic, the dialectical synthesis of those theses and antitheses. It is a genus, they are mutually exclusive species of it. (The difference between appearance and existence is another issue, I have dealt with elsewhere – briefly put, existence is a genus of appearance and non-appearance, the latter concepts being relative to that of consciousness whereas the former is assumed independent.)

None of these insights allows the conclusion that appearances are "neither real nor unreal" (granting that 'unreal' is understood to mean 'non-real'). All we can say is that some

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appearances are real and some unreal. Formally, the correct logical relation between the three concepts is as follows. *Deductively*, appearance is implied by reality and illusion, but does not imply them; for reality and illusion are contradictory, so that they cannot both be true and they cannot both be false. Moreover, *inductively*, appearance implies reality, until and unless it is judged to be illusion (by virtue of some inconsistency being discovered).

More precisely, all appearances are initially classed as real. Any appearance found self-contradictory is (deductively) illusory, and its contradictory is consequently self-evident and (deductively) real. All remaining appearances remain classed as real, so long as uncontested. Those that are contested have to be evaluated dynamically. When one appearance is belied by another, they are both put in doubt by the conflict between them, and so both become initially *problematic*. Thereafter, their relative credibilities have to be tentatively weighed in the overall context of available empirical and rational knowledge – and repeatedly reassessed thereafter, as that context develops and evolves. On this basis, one of these appearances may be judged more credible than the other, so that the former is labeled *probable* (close to

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real) and the latter relatively *improbable* (close to illusory). In the limit, they may be characterized as respectively effectively (inductively) real or illusory. Thus, reality and illusion are the extremes (respectively, 100% and 0%) in a broad range of probabilities with many intermediate degrees (including problemacy at the mid-point).

To be still more precise, *pure percepts* (i.e. concrete appearances, phenomena) are never illusory. The value-judgment of 'illusory' properly concerns concepts (i.e. abstract appearances, 'universals') only. When we say of a percept that it was illusory, we just mean that we misinterpreted it. That is, what we initially considered as a pure percept, had in fact *an admixture of concept*, which as it turned out was erroneous. For example, I see certain shapes and colors in the distance and think 'here comes a girl on a bike', but as I get closer I realize that all I saw was a pile of rubbish by the roadside. The pure percept is the shapes and colors I see; the false interpretation is 'girl on bike', the truer interpretation is 'pile of rubbish'. The initial percept has not changed, but my greater proximity has added perceptual details to it.

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My first impression was correct, only my initial judgment was wrong. I revise the latter concept, not through some superior means to knowledge, but simply by means of *further perception and conception.*

Strictly speaking, then, perception is never at issue; it is our conceptions that we evaluate. It is in practice, admittedly, often very difficult to isolate a percept from its interpretation, i.e. from conceptual appendages to it. Our perception of things is, indeed, to a great extent 'eidetic'. This fact need not, however, cause us to reject any perception (as many Western philosophers, as well as Buddhists, quickly do), or even all conception. The conceptual 'impurities' in percepts are not necessarily wrong. We know them to have been wrong, when we discover a specific cause for complaint – namely, a logical or experiential contradiction. So long as we find no such specific fault with them, they may be considered right. This just means that we have to apply the rules of

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> adduction[10] to our immediate interpretations of individual percepts, just as we do to complex theories relative to masses of percepts. These rules are universal: no judgment is exempt from the requirement of careful scrutiny and reevaluation.

Now, judging by Cheng's account and certain quotations of Nagarjuna therein, we could interpret the latter as having been trying to say just what I have said. For instance, Cheng writes[11]: "What Nagarjuna wanted to deny is that empirical phenomena… are absolutely real…. However, [this] does not mean that nothing exists. *It does not nullify anything in the world*" (my italics). I interpret this non-nullification as an acknowledgment of appearance as the minimum basis of knowledge. Nagarjuna may have had difficulties developing an appropriate terminology (distinguishing existence, appearance and reality, as I do above), influenced no doubt by his penchant for paradoxical statements seeming to express and confirm Buddhist mystical doctrine.

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10 Adduction treats all conceptual knowledge as hypothetical, to be tested repeatedly – in competition with all conceivable alternative hypotheses – with reference to all available logic and experience.

11 P. 42.

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But if that is what he meant, then he has not succeeded to arrive at a "middle way" (a denial of the Law of the Excluded Middle), but only at a "common way" (a granted common ground). As far as I am concerned, that is not a meager achievement – the philosophical discovery of phenomenology! But for him that would be trivial, if not counterproductive – for what he seeks is to deny ordinary consciousness and its inhibiting rationales, and to thereby leap into a different, higher consciousness capable of reaching transcendental truth or ultimate reality.

It is interesting to note that the Madhyamika school's effective denial of reality to all appearance was not accepted by a later school of Mahayana philosophy, the Yogachara (7^{th}-8^{th} cent. CE). Cheng describes the latter's position as follows[12]: "Every object, both mental and non-mental, may be logically or dialectically proven illusory. But in order to be illusory, there must be a certain thought that suffers from illusion. *The very fact of illusion itself proves the existence and reality of a certain consciousness or mind.* To say that everything mental and non-mental is unreal is intellectually

12 P. 25.

suicidal. The reality of something should at least be admitted in order to make sense of talking about illusion" (italics mine). That is the tenor of the phenomenological argument I present above, although my final conclusion is clearly not like Yogachara's, that everything is consciousness or mind (a type of Idealism), but leaves open the possibility of judging and classifying appearances as matter or mind with reference to various considerations.

The Madhyamika rejection of 'dualism' goes so far as to imply that "emptiness" is not to be found in nirvana, the antithesis of samsara (according to the earlier Buddhist viewpoint), but in 'neither samsara nor nirvana'. In truth, similar statements may be found in the Pali Canon, i.e. in the much earlier Theravada schools, so that it is not a distinctly Mahayana construct. The difference is one of emphasis, such statements, relatively rare in the earlier period, are the norm and frequently repeated in the later period. An example may be found in the *Dhammapada*, a sutra dating from the 3rd cent. BCE[13], i.e. four or five hundred years before Nagarjuna.

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13 London: Penguin, 1973. This is supposedly the date of composition, though the translator, Juan Mascaro, in his Introduction, states "compiled" at that time, thus seeming to imply

Here, samsara is likened to a stream or this shore of it, and nirvana to the further shore; and we are told to get beyond the two.

> *When you have crossed the stream of Samsara, you will reach Nirvana... He has reached the other shore, then he attains the supreme vision and all his fetters are broken. He for whom there is neither this nor the further shore, nor both....*

Such a formula is legitimate if taken as a warning that *pursuing* nirvana (enlightenment and liberation) is an obstacle to achieving it, just a subtle form of samsara (ignorance and attachment); there is no contradiction in saying that *the thought of* nirvana as a goal of action keeps us in samsara – this is an ordinary causal statement. The formula is also logically acceptable if taken as a reminder that no word or concept – not even 'samsara' or 'nirvana' – can capture or transmit the full meanings intended (i.e. 'not' here should more precisely be stated as 'not quite'). There is also

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an earlier composition. It is not clear in that commentary when the sutra is estimated to have been first written down. And if it was much later, say in the period of crystallization of Mahayana thought, say in 100 BCE to 100 CE, the latter may have influenced the monks who did the writing down. See ch. 26 (383-5) for the quotation.

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no contradiction in saying that one who has attained nirvana does not need to leave the world of those locked in samsara, but can continue to exist and act in it though distinctively in a way free of attachment.

But it would be a contradiction in terms to speak of 'emptiness' as 'neither samsara nor nirvana', given that nirvana as a concept is originally defined as non-samsara; the truth cannot be a third alternative. At best, one could say that emptiness is a higher level of nirvana (in an enlarged sense), which is not to be confused with the lower level intended by the original term nirvana, nor of course with samsara. In that case, nirvana (in a generic sense of the term, meaning literally non-samsara) includes both a higher species and a lower one; and the statement 'neither samsara nor lower-nirvana' is then compatible with the statement 'higher nirvana'. There is a big difference between rough, poetic, dramatic language, and literal interpretation thereof.

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3. Nagarjuna’s use of dilemma.

As we shall presently see, Nagarjuna often frames his arguments in dilemmatic form. So let me here give you a primer on the formal logic of dilemma. The form he tends to use is what logicians call ‘simple constructive dilemma’, which looks like this:

> **If X, then Y – and if not X, then Y**
> *(the major premises, or ‘horns’ of the dilemma)*
> **but either X or not X**
> *(the minor premise, left un stated if obvious)*
> **therefore, Y**
> *(the conclusion)*

where “X” and “not X” refers to some propositions under consideration and “Y” the (explicit or implicit) intermediate and final conclusion. In Nagarjuna, “Y” usually has the negative content “Z is meaningless or impossible or absurd”, i.e. it asserts that the propositions concerned (“X” or “not X”), or the concepts they involve, are faulty.

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The reasoning process involved is thus the following: the major premises (or ‘horns’ or ‘prongs’), are intended to show that the two theses, “X” and “not X”, each leads to some proposition “Y”; the minor premise reminds us that these theses are mutually exclusive and exhaust all available alternatives (it “takes the dilemma by its horns”), and the final conclusion is that only “Y”, their common implication, is left over for us. This form of argument is easily *validated*, for instance by contraposing the major premises, to obtain “if not Y, then both X and not X”; since “not Y” implies the paradox “both X and “not X”, it follows that its contradictory “Y” is true.

Note that the above dilemma is ‘two-pronged’, i.e. it considers two alternative theses, “X” and “not X”; it is also possible to – and Nagarjuna does so – engage in dilemmatic argument with three (or more) prongs in the major premise and a triple (or larger) disjunction in the minor premise. These have the form (briefly put)

> “**if A or B or C…, then Y;**
> **but either A or B or C…;**
> **therefore Y**”

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and can be validated in the same way[14].

Sometimes, Nagarjuna's argument is not properly dilemmatic in form, but only gives the impression that it is so. This occurs when the content of "Y" is merely "Z *cannot be established* as meaningful or as possible or as consistent" – i.e. when it signifies *a doubt rather than a denial*. Dilemma only works (i.e. can only be validated as just shown) if the major premises are proper "if/then" statements, i.e. provided "Y" is some *assertoric* proposition that logically *follows* "X" or "not X". It does not work if "Y" is merely *problematic* given "X" and/or "not X". The form "if X, surely Y" should not be confused with "if X, perhaps Y"; the former means "if X, *then* Y" and the latter means "if X, *not-then not* Y"; the latter is not logically equivalent to the former, but merely a subaltern of it. Similarly, *mutadis mutandis*, in the case of "if not X", of course.

When one or both of the major premises has this less definite form, all we can finally conclude is "*maybe* Y" (i.e. the content "Z *might be* meaningless or impossible or absurd") –

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[14] *Reductio ad absurdum*: denying the conclusion while maintaining the minor premise results in denial of the major premise.

which is the same as saying that we reach no final conclusion at all, since "maybe Y" can be said *ab initio* with regard to anything. At best, we might consider "Y" as inductively slightly more confirmed by the argument, i.e. the "maybe" as having incrementally increased in probability; but that does not deductively prove "Y". Dilemma, to repeat, can only be validated if the premises are assertoric; it has no validity if either or both of them are merely problematic. Yet Nagarjuna, as we shall see, sometimes considers such pseudo-dilemma as equivalent to dilemma, and the *non*-conclusion "maybe Y" as equivalent to a *negative* conclusion "Y". That is fallacious reasoning on his part.

As we shall see by and by, Nagarjuna indulges in **many other logical fallacies** in his philosophical discourse. (I have drawn up a list of the nine most striking ones in **Appendix 1**.)

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4. The subject-predicate relation.

Nagarjuna's assault on reason includes an attempted critique of verbal expression and the structure of language[15]. For him, words are conventions devoid of deductively absolute or inductively contextual meaning or relationships to each other. That he himself engages in criticism by means of language does not bother him, because he grants that it functions somewhat on a practical level, in a "conventional" way, within ordinary consciousness. His goal is as usual to take us beyond words and the illusions he claims they create, into the higher mode of consciousness that puts us in contact with ultimate reality. His means is to demonstrate that language is illogical and futile, putting forward at least two arguments:

(a) He asks, "is the subject identical with or different from the predicate?" His answer is stated by Cheng as follows. "If the subject is the same as the predicate, they would be one and it would make no sense to call one a subject and the other a predicate… the sentence

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[15] See Cheng, pp. 117-118. He there refers to MT V:1-5, and TGT V:1 and VI:1.

would be a tautology. If on the other hand, the subject is different from the predicate, there would be no particular connection between them." In either case, predication is found redundant.

(b) Furthermore, "what is the status of the subject before predication? Does it already have predicates predicated of it or not?" (i.e. predicates "other" than the subject itself). "If a subject is without any predicate predicated of it, it is incomprehensible and non-existent. If a subject without a predicate is non-existent, to what does our predicate apply? If on the other hand, the subject does have some other predicate predicated of it before we ascribe a predicate, what further function would be served by ascribing an additional predicate since it already has something predicated of it? If it needs this predicate, then a second and a third can in principle be applied. This would lead to infinite regress."

By such arguments, Nagarjuna seeks to give the impression that language is structurally unreliable and a stupid artifice. His arguments are shaped in such a way as to seem logically orderly and exhaustive, i.e. to consider all conceivable

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alternatives and eliminate them one by one, so that we have no leg left to stand on. He thus apparently uses some of the methodology of logic to convince us. But of course the descriptions of the nature and role of predication underlying his arguments constitute merely one particular view[16], so that his premises are not in fact exhaustive and only serve to show that his proposed view is faulty and to be rejected.

Thus, consider **argument 4(a)**. Its first premise about tautology is obvious and trivial, being itself tautological. More important, the second premise is not at all evident. The subject may well be "different from the predicate" and yet have a "particular connection" to it. There is no logical basis for Nagarjuna's proposed implication; the antecedent concept ("different") and the consequent concept ("unconnected") are quite distinct. If X equals Y in all respects, then 'if X, then Y' and 'if Y, then X' must both be true (though it does not follow that if they are both true, X = Y, since X and Y may well not be simultaneous). X and Y are different, means 'X does not in all respects equal Y', and so implies that X and Y are either non-simultaneous, or that 'if X, then Y' and/or 'if

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16 A view reminiscent of Kant's and other Western philosophers', incidentally.

Y, then X' is/are false. Whereas X and Y are unconnected, means that 'if X, then Y' and 'if Y, then X' must both be false, as any lesser such relations between X and Y. Thus, the former concept is wider than the latter, and does not imply it.

The subject-predicate relation under discussion may and usually is posited as, for instance, a classificatory one – a relation between an individual and a class, or a subclass (species) and an overclass (genus), so that the former is included in the latter without being equal in scope to it. 'Does not equal' does not exclude 'is greater than' or 'is smaller than' or 'exists before or after', or any other non-equal relationship. Nagarjuna suggests that if the terms are not identical, they cannot be related by the copula 'is' – but this copula was never intended to mean total equation. Nagarjuna cannot change the convention that 'is' is different from 'equal'; or if he insists on doing so and himself practices what he preaches, we can simply invent another word for what *we* mean by 'is'.

Since Nagarjuna's second premise is unwarranted, his attempted dilemma is dissolved.[17]

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[17] See Appendix 1: fallacies D and A.

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Now consider **argument 4(b)**. The first leg mentions a subject "without any predicate" and claims it "incomprehensible and non-existent", so that eventual predication relative to it is senseless. The second leg therefore suggests that a subject can only have one predicate (if any, see earlier), and that ascribing more of them to it implies in each case that the preceding one did not fulfill its intended function (definition?) so that unending predication would be called for – an impossible task. But these arguments are worthless, because Nagarjuna clearly *misrepresents predication*; his view of it is a simplistic caricature.

What do we in fact mean by a subject or a predicate? Primarily, an object of consciousness – an individual concrete or an abstract ultimately known through comparisons of such concretes[18]. This does not imply that we consider all existents as objects of consciousness, but only

[18] By 'concrete' I mean an experienced or perceived object, a phenomenon. By 'abstract', an object of reasoning or conception. A third class of object I do not mention here (so as not to complicate the issues) – objects of self-knowledge or 'intuitions'; suffices in the present context to say that, in relation to abstracts, they have the same position or role as concretes (namely, given data).

that as of the moment we think of something (as here) we must admit it as appearance and therefore as existent. Moreover, we need not and do not consider consciousness as invariably correct and all its objects as real – we may well conceive of an illusory object, which has no existence other than in the way of appearance. Secondly, this object (be it real or illusory) may be, and indeed has to be, cognized before we can name it and verbally predicate anything of it.[19] Predication, like its terms, is an object of consciousness before it is put into words. Consciousness of terms and propositions about them may be wordless; words are merely useful concretizations of intended objects of cognition. Also, before terms are brought together in a proposition, the objects intended by the terms have to be known (or believed, verbally or not) *somewhat*; the proposition serves to *add to* that knowledge of the terms, by observing or hypothesizing a certain relation between them.

Nagarjuna tries to suggest the opposite, that we only know things in the framework of predication (and perhaps, of prior verbalization), and that predication merely elucidates or

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19 See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

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restates knowledge (or belief) already present in the terms. But we may reply that something can well exist without/before being thought of, and be thought of alone without/before being verbalized; and even if/when named, it remains comprehensible without/before being made the subject of any non-verbal or verbal predications; and furthermore that predications are themselves objects of consciousness and that most of them enrich the meanings of both subject and predicate rather than merely redundantly repeating meanings already in them. Nagarjuna also apparently confuses predication with definition, when he considers that a single predication must suffice. In truth, any number of predicates may be ascribed to a subject; predicates are numerous *because* they are not tautologies of the subject; every term is a complex with a potential positive or negative relation to every other term. Even definition has no ambition to tell us everything about something, but merely claims to focus on one set of predicates, which seemingly abide invariably and exclusively with the subject; and a definition may turn out to be erroneous.

In conclusion, Nagarjuna's above arguments prove nothing but the incoherence of the particular view of discourse he

presents, and do not succeed in invalidating all discourse. The superficial form of his arguments is usually logical enough. But it is not enough to give logical form to our rhetoric, i.e. that the conclusion follows from the premises – the premises themselves have to be first be found obvious or reasonable. It is the premises of Nagarjuna's arguments that I above contest as naïve and misleading; and my conclusion is merely that his conclusion is not convincingly established.[20] The theory of predication and underlying processes that I rebut his theory with may not answer all questions about these issues, but it is certainly more thought-out and closer to the truth.

To the objection that his use of language to communicate his ideas and arguments implies an assumption (which he denies) that language contains knowledge of some reality, Nagarjuna replies that language is "conventional". This vague accusation of divorce from all reality has little content, so long as it leaves unexplained just how – in convincing detail – such convention functions otherwise (for language evidently does function, as his using it admits). We can also

20 See Appendix 1: fallacy D.

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point out that although words are in principle mere conventions, it does not follow that knowledge is "conventional".

First because that proposition, as a factual assertion, claims to know something beyond convention about knowledge; and as regards content, it claims the impossibility of any non-conventional linguistic knowledge (including, presumably, the knowledge the proposition itself imparts); whence, to assert that linguistic knowledge is conventional is self-contradictory. Secondly, all conventions imply factual knowledge: you have to know *that* there is a convention and *what* that convention is supposed to be and *how* to apply it correctly! You cannot have a convention about a convention… *ad infinitum* – it has to stop somewhere factual. Knowledge of conventions is also knowledge; a convention, too, is a reality in itself. It cannot float on an infinity of empty conventions, it has to finally be anchored on some real appearance.

Thirdly, because the conventionality of words is misunderstood. Affixing a label on something, arbitrarily or by agreement, does not imply that the 'something' concerned need not be previously known. We can be aware of things,

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and even think about them, without words. Words merely help us record rational products; giving us a relatively tangible instrument to manipulate. The value of words is not in making conceptual and logical thought *possible*, but only in making it *easier* (facilitating memory, classification, communication). Convention is therefore a secondary aspect of words; what counts is their meaning. A language composed only of meaningless words, each entirely defined by others, would have to be infinite in size, and would anyway communicate nothing outside itself. If the language is finite, *like ours*, it is bound to be based on some undefined prime words, and thus (since content is only verbal, here) be devoid of content, *incommunicado*. It could not even communicate its own conventions.

Thus, Nagarjuna's dismissal of language as such is an incoherent thesis, which upon closer scrutiny proves inconsistent with itself.

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5. Percepts and concepts.

According to pre-Mahayana Buddhist (and other Indian) philosophers, the world we experience and think about is composed of "*dharmas*"[21]. This term has various meanings[22], but the one focused on here seems to be equivalent to what we would call a phenomenon, or perhaps more broadly an appearance. A phenomenon is an object of experience; an appearance is an object of cognition of any kind, whether perceptual (phenomena), intuitive (objects of 'self-knowledge') or conceptual (objects of rational knowledge, 'universals'). Dharmas are "momentary, particular and multiple"; they are "not supported by substance or self" yet have their "own or independent nature"; they are "distinct and separate, yet appear and disappear in accordance with the principle of causality". Nagarjuna denies the "reality" and intelligibility of dharmas, using the following main arguments.

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[21] See Cheng, pp. 76-78, on this topic. He there refers to MT VII:1-2,23,25 and XV:1-2, as well as TGT IV:2, VI:1, VII, VIII:1.

[22] See Cheng, p. 128, for a list.

(a) He argues, "a momentary entity or impermanent *dharma*" can be "divided into non-enduring or non-abiding" segments, each of which "has, analytically, no duration whatever. It disappears as soon as it appears. Therefore, it cannot be said to have true existence." Yet, it is "supposed to have some duration." Whence, "to say that an entity is impermanent is tantamount to saying that what abides is non-abiding," which is "a contradiction in terms".

(b) Against the contention that "impermanence" does not signify "non-duration", but refers to "the reality of the phenomenal" that each thing "arises, endures for a moment and then ceases to be", Nagarjuna replies: "how [does each of these three] characteristics characterize a *dharma*?" Is it "simultaneously or successively"? It cannot be simultaneously, because "origination, duration and cessation are opposed by nature: at the time of cessation there should not be duration, and at the time of duration there should not be cessation." It cannot be successively, because if the characteristics occur at different times, there would

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be three different phenomena" and "how can different phenomena be true of the 'same thing'?"

(c) Furthermore, he argues: these three characteristics – origination, duration and cessation – must be either "created" or "non-created". If they are the created, then each of them should in turn "have the three characteristics", each of which in turn, "like other created things," should have them, and so on *ad infinitum.* If, on the other hand, "each characteristic is non-created, how can it characterize a created thing?" In either case, then, we have a "conceptual problem".

(d) Moreover, he argues: "what is the relation between an object and characteristics?"[23]. Are they "identical" or "different"? "If identical, there would be no distinction between them, and it would be absurd to say that the one is object and the other, characteristics." Nor could one say that they are identical in the sense that the object is "the substance

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[23] It is not clear here whether specifically the three characteristics of arising, enduring and ceasing are meant, or more generally any characteristics. But it does not affect the argument.

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of" the characteristics, and the characteristics are "the manifestation of" the object. For to do so would, according to Nagarjuna, imply their relation to be "reflexive", and therefore that "a thing would be subject and object at the same time", which is "clearly impossible, because subject and object are different". If, on the other hand, an object is "different from" its characteristics, "there would be no internal connection between them." Therefore, "characteristics characterize objects" cannot be said.

(e) He also argues, "whatever can be conceived to exist has a cause. All things are produced by a combination of various causes and conditions[24]. When the conditions change, things will also change and even disappear. *To exist* means to be caused, conditioned, generated or dependent on something. But by definition a *dharma* is an entity which has its own or independent nature." Whence, he concludes, "to say

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24 In Buddhist philosophy, causes are relatively internal or direct, conditions are relatively external or indirect. But the word 'cause' may also be taken more broadly, to include such causes and conditions indiscriminately. See *Lotus in a Stream*, by Hsing Yun (New York: Weatherhill, 2000), for more details (pp. 80-82).

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> **that a dharma exists would be the same as saying that an independent thing is dependent", i.e. the claim "*dharmas* exist" is "a contradiction in terms" and "absurd".**

Nagarjuna concluded from these arguments that the concept of dharma upheld by his predecessors, Buddhist or otherwise, was confused and untenable. Reality could not, therefore, be understood through such conceptual tools. But let us now look at his arguments more closely and critically. As we shall see, they are far from conclusive, and generally fallacious.

Argument 5(a) is simply a claim that when a duration of time (moment) is *infinitely divided*, its constituent points of time (instants) have zero duration and, therefore, cannot be said to exist. This argument is already known to Western philosophy through the paradoxes of Zeno of Elea (born c. 490 BCE), and has been amply contested since then by many philosophers, mathematicians and physicists, on various grounds[25]. My own (additional, yet essential) objection to it

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[25] See Ralph E. Kenyon Jr, ***Atomism and Infinite Divisibility***, a doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1994. The full text is available on the Internet at http://www.xenodochy.org/rekphd/.

would be that Nagarjuna here fails to analyze *how and in what order* the concepts he uses arise.

What is under discussion here (viz. the dharmas), are primarily phenomena, empirical givens. In fact, at any one moment of experience, what we perceive is one holistic phenomenon; the 'cutting up' of that total phenomenon into smaller, individual phenomena (different shapes, colors, sounds, etc.) is not in itself perception, but one of the first rational acts. We *experience* things in flux – coming, staying a while, going. To understand such motion, we construct a *concept* of time, which we gradually refine (with measurements, mathematics, Relativity theory). Motion is an experience, but time is a concept. The concept of time *arises in response to* the experience of motion, so it has to be tailored to fit and cannot be used to deny such experience. If a conflict occurs between the two, it is the concept and not the experience that has to be put in doubt and adjusted.[26]

Now, what is the 'infinite division' of a phenomenon that Nagarjuna appeals to? It is not a physical act of slicing a phenomenon with a knife, or anything of the sort. For we

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26 See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

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have no experience of infinite division in the physical realm; we may subdivide a material body or draw lines on a piece of paper or a computer screen only so far, not *ad infinitum*. Infinite division is an imaginary act. If the phenomenon is of the 'material' kind, the division may occur on a 'mental' image of it; if the phenomenon is already of the mental kind, the division can occur directly on it. But even in our heads, we do not in fact divide infinitely. We may slice the image, then mentally 'zoom in' and slice that slice, then zoom in and slice again a few more times, then we stop.

Now, the zooming in is merely production of a new image – so we are not even, in fact, repeatedly subdividing the same image; we merely *say* 'suppose this image is a detail of the preceding'. The new image has the same size as the preceding, but its *scale* is declared different. Furthermore, the subdivision process takes time, and we do not anyway have an infinity of time – so we have to stop it after a few sample shots, and then *say* 'suppose I repeat this to infinity'. Thus, infinite division is not even a real act in the mental field, but a mere verbal statement – i.e. at best, *a concept* referring to the intention to 'cut' and memory of recurrent events, projected to a hazy 'infinity'.

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Furthermore, when we imagine division of a (two-dimensional) phenomenon, we imagine (one dimensional) line drawn somewhere in the middle of it. But how is the geometrical entity known as a line (length devoid of width) first conceived? It is derived from experience of the visible *boundaries* of phenomena (with length and width) in relation to their surrounds; there has to be some difference between the two sides of a boundary for it to be visible. A line in the middle of an extended phenomenon is thus partly a concept, and not a pure percept. We never entirely see a line, we always have to some extent think it. We have to effectively accompany it with the thought 'this line has no width'. Thus, the visualization of division does not in itself prove infinite divisibility.

Nagarjuna, for all his supposed meditative introspection, has clearly not paid attention to how his concept of 'infinite division' arose in detail.[27] His argument or 'thought experiment' is without substance, because he has in fact certainly not engaged in 'infinite division'. He has not shown experientially that dharmas of zero extension in time are the

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27 See Appendix 1: fallacy E.

building blocks of dharmas with duration in time. He has therefore not demonstrated that a contradiction exists in the concept of momentary dharma.

Let us now move on to **argument 5(b).** It is true of all phenomena that they are momentary. It does not follow that all existents are momentary, but that need not concern us here. Nagarjuna's predecessors or opponents are quite correct in their analysis of the momentary as something that appears, endures awhile then disappears. Nagarjuna is correct in saying that these three characteristics are opposed, i.e. cannot occur simultaneously. But his definition of simultaneity as "at the time of" is vague and misleading. His definition of succession as occurrence "at different times" is also incorrect. Both premises of his dilemma are therefore confused, as we shall now see.

For the arising and the ceasing are conceived as *at the temporal boundaries* of the duration, and so not as *in* it nor quite as *outside* it. Arising occurs at the instant (the unextended point of time) the duration starts, and ceasing occurs at the instant the duration ends. The concept of arising refers to just that instant of flip-over from absence to presence, and the concept of ceasing to just that instant of

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passing from presence to absence. The coming, staying and going are successive, in the sense that the arising and the ceasing are not simultaneous with each other. But each of the latter is instantaneous and contiguous (and in that sense only, simultaneous) with the duration (at either end of it). They cannot therefore be said to be 'at different times' from it. The arising cannot be said to be 'before' the duration and the ceasing cannot be said to be 'after' the duration; they are not time-consuming processes (though such processes may precede and cause them). The two limits of duration (be it brief or long) cannot actually be dissociated from it. The phenomenon remains one, even as we conceptually distinguish three 'characteristics' of it.

We thus see that Nagarjuna's argument is based on a stupid or deliberate fuzziness of definition.[28] The confusions involved in his dilemma are entirely of his own fabrication; he sows them to have pretexts for criticism. He uses 'at the same time' to mean 'in overlapping durations' and 'at different times' to mean 'in separate durations', whereas what is under discussion is instants which are the edges of a

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28 See Appendix 1: fallacy F.

duration. No wonder then that he concludes that there is either contradiction or separation.

Now study **argument 5(c)**. Two arguments are intermingled in it – one relates to the hierarchy of concepts and percepts[29], the other relates to causation.

Nagarjuna claims that the three stages (arising, staying, ceasing) of each phenomenon may be viewed as in turn a phenomenon. What he relies on here is a reification of the first and last stages; he tacitly implies that because they have separate names they too have durations. The distinctions between the three are thus erased. If we consider the conceptual development involved, we see that, in a first phase, 'phenomenon' refers to a unit of *perception* (a piece of the perceptual field isolated by mental projection, to be exact); in a second phase, we distinguish within this event or thing an instantaneous beginning, a momentary middle and an instantaneous end, and accordingly form *concepts* of arising, enduring and ceasing. The latter are abstract aspects of the concrete phenomenon, and therefore in a sense 'present in' it and 'part of' it.

[29] See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

But contrary to what Nagarjuna suggests, it does not follow that arising and ceasing *in turn* have a beginning, a middle and an end – since they are instantaneous. It does not even follow that the middle part of the initial phenomenon has *another* beginning, middle and end – since we have already abstracted the two ends of the phenomenon away from its middle. We thus have no basis for an infinite regression of concepts; we remain only justified in having one concrete phenomenon and only three abstract aspects of it. The "characteristics" are phenomenal in the sense of being distinguishable in a phenomenon; but not being themselves 'divisible' in the same way as it, they cannot rightly be called phenomenal in the same sense as it. One cannot say that arising both arises and ceases at once, or say the same about ceasing; because neither of them has duration; that which arises has to be absent *for a while* then present *for a while*, and similarly in the opposite direction with ceasing.

Furthermore, whatever produces the primary phenomenon *also* produces the three aspects of it we have distinguished in it; they do not require *additional* causes that will *separately* produce them. Even if we regard, as did Nagarjuna's philosophical forerunners, everything in the phenomenal as

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having been "created" (in the sense at least of being produced by preceding causes and conditions), perhaps in an infinite chain, it does not mean that such causality forks out repeatedly and endlessly.

The "thing" caused, with all its characteristics, is one. Ordinarily, the cause causes arrival, a minimum stay, and if the event is momentary thereafter a departure. We may in some cases identify something as causing the arrival of that thing; a second as causing its staying on; and a third as causing its departure. But even then the cause of the arrival is also partially a cause of the staying on and of the departure, since without arriving a momentary event would not be able to stay or depart. Also, the cause of the staying on is a partial cause – in a negative sense of a hindrance – of the eventual departure. In such cases, however, 'the cause' of the phenomenon as a whole would simply be *composed of* a series of three subsidiary 'causes' – one determining the arising and a minimum momentary stay, the next prolonging the duration after arrival and preventing ceasing, and the last interrupting duration and determining ceasing. This is merely an analysis of causation and not a multiplication of causes *ad infinitum*.

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Thus, we have replied to Nagarjuna that the thing characterized is not apart from its three characteristics, and they do not in turn each have three characteristics. Also, the respective causes of the three characteristics together sum up to the cause of what they characterize, and its cause is not apart from their causes. Nagarjuna gives the impression of making logical analyses, but in fact he glosses over details and nuances at his personal convenience.[30] His arguments give an appearance of structure and order, but beneath them lies a great carelessness in observation.

Now study **argument 5(d)**. Are an object and its characteristics "identical" or "different"? An individual object could be regarded as the sum total of all characteristics, permanent and transient, observable in it. More precisely, if (or so long as) one or several, or one or several combination(s), of these characteristics is observed in the object and never in any other, we may consider every such single or collective characteristic as a sign of the object, i.e. as signifying its individuality or essence. The single or collective characteristic(s) exclusive to an object could thus

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30 See Appendix 1: fallacy E.

be regarded as "identical" with it for all intents and purposes, without however wholly equating it/them to the object. For the object as a whole should be taken to include its non-distinctive attributes or actions, as well as its distinctive essences.

So the answer to Nagarjuna's question is as follows. His terminology is as usual lacking in nuances[31]; for this reason, the choices he gives us seem restrictive and force us into dead ends. We have to first distinguish essential (distinctive) characteristics (or sets of them) from common (non-exclusive) ones. The individual object is the totality of its facets and history, including both these types of characteristics. The essential characteristics could be considered as the "substance" of the object; the non-essential ones, as its "manifestation". This would avoid any implication of "reflexive" relation. Thus, we can regard some characteristics as "identical" with the object (without however meaning equal to it); and others as "different" from it (which does not imply them disconnected from it). And we can well say that "characteristics characterize objects", while

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31 See Appendix 1: fallacy E.

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remaining aware that the subject and verb of this proposition are of variable meaning.

Of course, none of this tells us what the “relation” between an object and its characteristics precisely is, i.e. in what sense the later ‘belong’ to the former. We have above just accepted that there are relations, which we can in practice identify by observation and distinguish between statistically. To better understand the relational aspect, we need to develop a theory of ‘universals’ – what are these things and how do we know them? What we perceive are concrete objects; the ‘universals’ are abstractions from these phenomena.

Abstraction is performed by comparisons and contrasts between present phenomena and/or presumed memories of past phenomena. Abstracts are apparent as the various measures or degrees in the wave motions that constitute phenomena. Phenomena of light, sound, etc. have various intensities, frequencies, etc. These quantitative or mathematical variations are inherent in the phenomena of perception; some are measured roughly and ‘instinctively’, others, through conscious experiment and careful calculation. In either case, rational work is required to distinguish them out from their perceptual context, and from each other; and to

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name, interrelate and classify them; and to keep our theses concerning them logically consistent. For this reason, we regard them as objects of another level of cognition, the conceptual, and say that abstracts are known by conception.

In the Buddhist tradition preceding Nagarjuna, "dharmas" are already said to be "empty". This can be rationally understood to mean, not that objects are devoid of essential characteristics (in the sense above defined), but that there is nothing non-phenomenal (or noumenal) to consider behind the phenomenal. I would agree with this proposition, and submit that when other Buddhist philosophers combat the idea of "essences", they are not denying that abstract characteristics are distinguishable within phenomena and that some of those are distinctive, but are denying a particular philosophical development, namely the notion that "an object" is *more than* (or even *other than*) its evident phenomenal aspects and the inductively justifiable abstractions therefrom (which, to repeat, are merely measurements). The doctrine of "emptiness" initially opposed such fanciful reification as sidetracking our attention, and recommended we remain focused on what is in

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fact apparent to us. Knowledge is knowledge of actual phenomena, not of some imagined 'reality' behind them.

A lot of the confusion in this issue is due to failure to make two distinctions. If we perceptually knew all the phenomena *ever existing* in the universe, we obviously could not logically claim that there might be any *further* phenomenon hidden behind them. But because we conceptually know (having memory of our changing scope of knowledge, and in any case the uncertainty at all times that we have perceived everything) that we have access to *only some* of the phenomena in the universe, we can legitimately suppose that there might be *yet unknown* phenomena to consider, and that these might in yet unknown ways affect known phenomena. Furthermore, even if the totality of existents appeared to us, i.e. even if we experienced everything that ever is, was or will be, on a concrete level, we could still additionally abstract their similarities and differences, and their statistical regularities and irregularities, and point to such *abstract* aspects as underlying substrata or causes.

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Thus, two distinctions are called for. The first is a distinction between a theoretical perceptual omniscience, from which viewpoint *by definition* no hidden phenomena are conceivable, and a practical relativity of knowledge to limited perceptual context, which viewpoint *allows for supposition* of unknown but subterraneously operative phenomena. In the former case, 'existent' and 'apparent' are co-extensive, but in the latter case 'existent' is a genus of 'apparent'. Secondly, neither of these absolute and relative positions excludes a category of being and knowing other than the perceptual, viz. the conceptual, from being appealed to. In both cases, abstracts can still be posited as 'underlying' concretes. Here, the concept of 'apparent' is enlarged to include not only concretes (phenomena) but also abstracts (universals).

On this basis, we can ask what Buddhism means when it says that "dharmas" are "empty". Does it mean that phenomena have no other *phenomena* behind them? This may be affirmed by a proven omniscient Subject, but the rest of us have to always concede that there

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> are probably phenomena hidden to us (as we often discover later), which may impinge on those known to us. Does it, alternatively, mean that concrete appearances (phenomena) have no *abstract* appearances behind them? This cannot logically be claimed without self-contradiction, since such a claim is itself manifestly abstract; the fact of the claim must itself be taken into consideration. One may legitimately argue, discursively, about the objectivity or subjectivity of the abstract, but not about its ultimate validity in some way. Also, whether the abstract is present in the object or in the subject, it still *abides* – at least in the sense that there is no time duration when it is absent from existence.

Nagarjuna's doctrine of "emptiness" includes not only the previous denial of a noumenal world, but equally denial of the phenomenal world.[32] It is an attempted one-upmanship on his predecessors. They were anti-rationalist, in the sense of rejecting a certain excess of rationalism, a sickness or error of rational projection that ignores, obscures or eclipses

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32 See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

experience. He typically takes a more radical and extreme posture and rejects *all* rationalism indiscriminately. But this is really a rejection of experience, a claim that ultimate reality is beyond it – i.e. it is in effect another form of noumenalism, a return to the sickness his predecessors combated. He pretends that his conclusion can be reached by logical means; but his means are evidently not logical.

Finally, consider **argument 5(e)**. Nagarjuna takes as one of his premises that all conceivable existents have causes of some sort. But that is debatable.[33] We might accept a statement that all phenomena (i.e. perceived existents, concretes) have causes – though even that is debatable. For such a general statement can only at best be known inductively, by hypothetical generalization from cases where causality has specifically been established; strictly speaking, it is also conceivable that some phenomena (or perhaps some unperceived concrete existents) are eternal or spontaneous or free (i.e. uncaused in some sense). But what of conceived existents (abstracts) – do they also, as he claims, all have causes? That is even more debatable. When we speak of a

33 See Appendix 1: fallacy D.

kind of thing causing another kind of thing, we more precisely mean that instances of the former cause instances of the latter. As for large abstractions, like God or the universe as a whole, or even just existence, we can conceive them as existing without cause.

As a second premise Nagarjuna takes the idea of his philosophical predecessors or opponents that a “dharma” has “its own or independent nature” as meaning that it is independent of causes. But this is not their intended meaning, which is only that dharmas are “distinct and separate”, i.e. each have a specific nature of their own. This is evident in their explicit position that, as we have seen, dharmas “appear and disappear in accordance with the principle of causality”. So Nagarjuna is playing on the equivocation of the term “independent”. He does so to load the dice in favor of his desired conclusion, making it seem as if they made self-contradictory claims about dharmas.[34]

Nagarjuna thus has not disproved the statement that dharmas exist. And in fact such a statement has no need of rational proof, if it is understood to mean that phenomena exist, for

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34 See Appendix 1: fallacy F.

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that is empirically evident. We know for sure of the existence of "existence" only through the experience of phenomena.[35] The concept of existence is based on that of phenomena, enlarging the latter to include hypothetical unperceived concretes, and at a later stage hypothetical abstracts and hypothetical objects of intuition (self-knowledge).

What, anyway, do we mean by the "nature" of a thing? My understanding of the term refers to the 'laws' of behavior of the thing, signifying that things exhibit certain regularities of behavior (being or doing). For instances, something may have character X or do X *always* (while in existence), or *only when* Y occurs. Apparently, in our universe, things cannot be or do just anything we imagine for them. Maybe, if everything is just energy, they ultimately can; but the world as we observe it so far seems to contain things with limited behavior possibilities. We acknowledge this apparent fact by saying that existents have a 'nature'. We do not thereby imply them independent of causes, as Nagarjuna suggests, but on the contrary say that if things have causes, they have a nature. Moreover, even something without causes may have a

35 See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

nature, if it has limited behavior patterns. Only something not subject to 'law' at all has no 'nature'.

Phenomena may yet be ultimately not subject to 'law', i.e. devoid of 'nature'. But to support that thesis, Nagarjuna ought rather to have emphasized, like his predecessors, the positivistic idea that phenomena exist in succession, each moment caused by a previous and causing the next, without an underlying continuity between them across time. This concept remains conceivable, if we gloss over our observations of regularity, arguing that regularity is only known by generalization. But generalization is justified as follows[36]. We observe certain things that are X to always be Y; we infer that all X are Y, because we refuse to assume that there are Xs that are *not* Y until we have observed such negative cases. On the other hand, to refuse to generalize would be to admit such imagined changes in polarity without empirical basis.

Thus, generalization (duly controlled by particularization, when new observations belie it) is a *more empirical* rational act than non-generalization; it makes less assumptions. I have

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[36] See my *Future Logic*, ch. 50 and 54-55.

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observed some Xs that are Y, and maintain that all are since some are; but I have not observed any Xs that are not Y, so how can I presume the latter possible without specific additional reasons? The notion that *anything might become anything* is thus a very hard thesis to prove – one would have to *observe* everything eventually turning into everything else, one could not appeal to any generalization whatsoever. One would also have to explain why different things were transformed in different sequences. One would therefore have to be omniscient to prove such a thesis. Or one would have to find some convincing indirect theoretical reason to believe it, such as experimental and mathematical evidence that all energies are convertible into all others (a unified field theory), which neither Nagarjuna nor anyone has succeeded in doing yet.

To summarize, all five arguments proposed by Nagarjuna in relation to the concept of dharmas are faulty (the three middle arguments being inconclusive dilemmas[37], the other two not self-contradictory), and indeed probably intentionally so. It is not the concepts he attacks that are absurd or contradictory, it

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37 See Appendix 1: fallacy B.

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is his own discourse that merits such condemnation. It may seem incredible that so many people for so many centuries have studied his work without crying 'foul!' – but, what can I say, that is the way of the human psyche. It can allow itself to be intimidated by someone's prestige and submit unthinkingly to authority, or to gloss over incredulity in response to a promise of salvation dangled appetizingly before it.

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6. Motion and rest.

Nagarjuna denies the knowability and possibility of motion and likewise of rest, and purports to refute them by various arguments[38], thus (by negation) proving the truth of the "emptiness" doctrine. He does this by means of outwardly logical argument forms, like (two- or three-pronged) dilemmas or showing some propositions to be self-contradictory or circular. But in all cases, it is evident that some of the premises he appeals to are arbitrary and designed to sow confusion so as to yield his foregone conclusions. I shall first present his arguments, then their rebuttal.

a) **According to Cheng, Nagarjuna divides the "path of motion" into three segments, the "already passed", the "yet-to-be passed" and the "being passed", and argues that if we examine each of these, we cannot find "the act of passing" in it, concluding that "motion is impossible and cannot be established". The act of**

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38 See Cheng, pp. 78-83, on this topic. He there refers to MT II:1-21. Nagarjuna's claim that motion is impossible is comparable to that of Zeno the Eleatic, but the latter does not deny rest like the former; furthermore, their arguments are very different.

passing is not to be found in the already passed, "because it has already been passed"; nor in the yet-to-be passed, "because it is not yet"; nor in the being passed, "because if we are still examining whether there is the act of passing, how can we use the 'the path which is being passed' to establish the act of passing?"

b) Similarly, Nagarjuna contends that motion cannot even "begin", in any of these three segments. Not in the already passed, because is it is "the effect of" the beginning to pass, which "is over". Nor in the beginning to pass, because it is "the starting point of change" (i.e. it precedes the yet-to-be passed), which "has no change yet". Nor in the being passed, which "is possible only if there is an act of passing," which in turn "is possible only if there is a beginning of passing". Additionally, "since motion cannot even be started, how can we talk about a place to go?"

c) Similarly, it is claimed that "the mover or moving entity cannot be established" and that "the mover cannot move". For "if someone moves… we cannot say that 'the one who has already moved' moves

because his action is over"; and "we cannot say that 'the one who has not yet moved' moves because that involves a contradiction". Finally, we cannot say "the mover means 'the one who is moving'", since "there can be a mover only when there is an act of moving, yet whether there is an act of moving is the issue we are examining" and so we would be "begging the question".

d) It is also claimed doubly fallacious to say "the mover moves", because we would be asserting that "the mover can be separated from the act of motion" and that "there are two kinds of motion, namely, motion in the mover and motion in the act of moving". Here, Nagarjuna questions the very relation between mover and motion. Are the two "identical or different"? If the former, then "the mover would always be moving". If the latter, then "the mover can exist without motion, and vice versa". Both these assumptions are "absurd", so "neither motion nor mover could be established".

e) Lastly, we might be tempted to conclude, from the preceding arguments against motion, that everything

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is at rest; but Nagarjuna preempts this way out, by arguing that even "rest cannot be established" as follows. That which rests is either a "mover (or moving thing)" or a "non-mover (or non-moving thing)". But "it is absurd to say that the mover rests, because this involves contradiction"; nor can it be said that "the mover rests when he stops moving", because "when someone stops moving, he is not the mover anymore". It is also impossible to say that "the non-mover rests… because rest means cessation of motion," and since "the non-mover does not move" he "cannot cease to move (rest)". Since these are the only two alternatives, "rest is impossible".

f) Another argument with the same conclusion: rest "must happen at some place or at some time". It cannot happen "at that which is already passed (or the past), or at that which is yet to be passed (or the future), or at that which is being passed (or the present)", because "as pointed out previously, there cannot be motion in any one of these situations, hence there cannot be the cessation of motion, or rest." Cheng goes on to explain: "For Nagarjuna, motion

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and rest are relative to each other", and he concludes "hence both are devoid of specific character or nature, and neither is real."

Thus Nagarjuna apparently shows that "one cannot hold that what is real is permanent or impermanent". It would follow that the beliefs relating to motion and rest, generated by ordinary consciousness and by its logic, are illusory and invalid; whence, we ought to instead adhere to that other, superior way of knowledge defended by Nagarjuna – awareness of the void. All this is of course nonsense, as I shall now demonstrate.

Let us start with **argument 6(a).** At first sight, it may be construed as an attempt to say, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus did, that you cannot step into the same river twice – or indeed once, since as you are stepping into it, its waters have already moved on. But the intent of such a statement is merely to say that everything is always in motion. This is indeed one of the tenets of traditional Buddhism ("impermanence", *anitya*), but not Nagarjuna's intent here, which is a denial of motion as such.

His argument states that *actual motion* ("the act of passing") has to take place in past, future or present. Being by

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definition present, actual motion admittedly cannot take place in the past or future, as the first two premises imply. But that does not mean that when the past was present, motion was not actual in it; nor that when the future becomes present, motion will not be actual in it. *The label "actual" is not static, but refers dynamically to every instance of "the present"*; as the present changes position on the time-line, so does the reference point of actuality. As for the third premise, it is misleading, for we can well (and indeed must) say that actual motion exists in the present.[39] Nagarjuna suggests that we have to prove ("examine" and "establish") that actuality is in the present before we can affirm it. But even if this were granted, the inferred third premise would be problematic, and not the assertion that actuality is *not* in the present; in which case, the dilemma as a whole would remain inconclusive, and not result in *denial* that motion is possible and knowable.[40]

However, furthermore, we *can* prove that motion is actual in the present. We can refer to the *appearance* of actual motion in the present, and claim it as 'empirical evidence'. Such experience is logically sufficient to *prove* the point at issue,

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39 See Appendix 1: fallacy H.

40 See Appendix 1: fallacy B.

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even if only taken phenomenologically, as mere appearance, irrespective of the status of 'reality' or 'illusion' ultimately granted to particular motions, and irrespective of the issue as to whether what is perceived (the phenomenal) is material or mental or whatever. Additionally, we have to ask how the concepts of actuality, motion and present *arise* in the first place. They arise in relation to such experiences, and therefore cannot be required to be thereafter "proved" *by unstated means and standards* to be related to them.[41] There is no inconsistency or circularity in our position; it is Nagarjuna's position that deserves such criticism.

Next, consider **argument 6(b)**. Without a doubt, *when* motion begins, it must begin in past, future or present. But incidentally, a fourth possibility exists, which Nagarjuna does not mention – that of a motion *without* beginning; so we should say when *and if* motion begins. Even so, here all three horns of his dilemma are incorrect.[42]

Motion may well begin in the past – even if later motion, in the more recent past, is a consequence of such earlier (beginning) motion; there is nothing illogical in this scenario,

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41 See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

42 See Appendix 1: fallacy B.

and Nagarjuna's rejection of it is arbitrary.[43] Motion may also well begin in the future – it has indeed not yet begun, but when and if it does, it will take place in the segment of the time-line we now call the future; this too is obvious and quite consistent. Nagarjuna seems to have trouble understanding the tenses of verbs, freezing some verbs (e.g. begin) in the present tense while mixing them with others in the past or future tenses.[44] Lastly, motion, when (and if) it begins, begins in the present; "beginning of passing", "act of passing" and "being passed" are one and the same in the present instant (point of time), though as the present stretches into a moment (duration) the concepts may diverge. Nagarjuna uses that ambiguity to suggest a conceptual conflict, but there is none.[45] Incidentally, similar arguments could have been formulated with regard to "ending of motion", and similarly rebutted.

Let us now inspect **argument 6(c)**. Here again, Nagarjuna tries to confuse us with mixtures of tenses, in his first two

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43 See Appendix 1: fallacy D.

44 See Appendix 1: fallacy H.

45 See Appendix 1: fallacy F.

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premises.[46] We indeed cannot say that one who has already moved *now* moves, but we can say that he did *then* move; his action is now over, but was not over then. Nor indeed can we say that one who has not-yet moved is *currently* moving, but we can say without contradiction that he may well *later* move. As for the third premise, it is true that we cannot speak of a mover (or moving thing)[47] without referring to a movement, but it is not true that whether there is a movement is an issue under examination. As indicated earlier, the present motion under discussion is an empirical given, not requiring *further* proof of whatever kind. The concept of it arises only in relation to such experiences (current, or at least remembered), and all discussion about it is subsequent; without such experience, the word 'motion' would be meaningless to all of us, including Nagarjuna, and there would be nothing to discuss.[48]

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46 See Appendix 1: fallacy H.

47 The terms 'mover' or 'moving thing' are clearly not intended here to have causal connotations, i.e. to tell us who or what is causing the movement or being caused to move. That is not the issue under discussion, note well. The terms are meant neutrally, to refer to the underlying entity undergoing movement.

48 See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

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Whether or not motion necessitates an *underlying entity* (a mover or moving thing) is, however, an issue – we can legitimately ask the question. The assumption of a substratum to (empirical) motion is a more complex, conceptual act, subject to the usual checks and balances of inductive and deductive logic. On a naïve, pre-philosophical level, we would argue that we never experience instances of disembodied motion, but always things *in* motion. But further reflection puts this impression in doubt, for we cannot *empirically* equate a body experienced at one time to a body experienced at another time. Such equation is very conceptual, requiring a *hypothesis* of continuity. We may claim that hypothesis as inductively true, if it is consistent and repeatedly confirmed, and providing no counter-hypothesis of equal or better coherence and credibility is found, but we cannot claim it as a purely empirical or deductive truth.

"Whether there is an act of moving" is not an issue; the issue is whether there is an abiding "mover or moving thing" beneath that "act of moving", or whether that "act of moving" is a mere event of successive experiences flashing forth. My own answer would be that even if there are no

individual entities behind successive appearances, we can at least point to *existence* as such as a substance, or *the universe* as a whole as an entity, and regard that as necessarily abiding in the midst of its successive, changing appearances. If this argument establishes a collective substratum, then individual substrata become more easily acceptable.

Moreover, the concept of a substratum is not an arbitrary invention, but designed to register and explain the enduring similarities between successive appearances despite the dissimilarities we label as changes. We say that change has occurred because we notice that two appearances are *in some respects* different; we can also say that something has endured because we notice that the two appearances are *in other respects* the same. Without the hypothesis of some constant underlying change, we would have to regard the remaining similarities between the two appearances as mere coincidence. But it seems improbable to us that such repetition would be just happenstance; explanation seems

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called for. It is to calm our surprise at such recurring coincidences that we posit a substratum or substrata.[49]

As already explained in the previous chapter, this underlying constancy may in some cases be identified as something concrete (i.e. a phenomenon to be sought and found), whereas in other cases it remains merely abstract (i.e. just an appearance of sameness in some respect). The constancy may most appropriately be labeled a substance or entity if it is phenomenal. But even in cases where no phenomenal substratum can be pointed to or found, but only the repetition over time of an abstract characteristic, we may think of the latter as a substratum of sorts, for abstract existence is also a category of being. This is especially true if abstracts are regarded as objective; but it is also true if they are considered

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[49] To give an example. A bird stays awhile in my field of vision. Many of its features are constant (e.g. the shape of its head); some vary (e.g. its wings may be folded or spread out). If the bird appearance changed suddenly into the appearance of a rabbit, then a tree, then a car, then an elephant – I might well be tempted to consider appearances as without substratum. But because this does not happen, at least not within the brief and narrow scope of my experience of life, I opt for the thesis that there is an underlying entity (that I call a concrete "bird"). At a later stage, seeing many similar entities, having in common various anatomical and biological characteristics (such as wings, etc.), which distinguish them from other entities (e.g. winged insects), I additionally formulate an abstract class of "birds".

subjective, for in such case the continuity of something within the Subject has to be admitted.

Thus, Nagarjuna's third premise is wrong in some respects and right in others. *Ab initio*, he is wrong in doubting motion and alleging a circularity, but right in effectively doubting a mover or moving thing. The former is not inferred from the latter, but vice versa. The former is empirical and requires no proof, the latter is hypothetical and requires proof. But reason is able to propose proof. The proof proposed by it is, however, inductive, not deductive. The room for doubt that inductive (as against deductive) proof leaves over, opens a window of opportunity for the thesis of "emptiness"; but that is not thanks to Nagarjuna's wobbly reasoning.[50] His Buddhist goal is still possible (perhaps through meditation), but not his discursive means.

Now for **argument 6(d)**. Let us first focus on Nagarjuna's claim that if mover and motion were "identical" then "the mover would always be moving". He ignores that we may well call that which is moving a mover *during the duration* of his motion, without implying that this label remains

50 See Appendix 1: fallacy B.

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applicable before or after the motion.[51] Furthermore, that motion and mover are precisely co-extensive in time does not imply that they are "identical"; if that was our belief, we would not use distinct words for them (or we would consider them synonymous) – our intention in doing so is to refer to distinct aspects of the whole event, the perceived change of place and the conceived substratum of such change.

Likewise, his claim that if mover and motion are "different" they could exist separately is gratuitous. Two aspects of a single event may be distinguished intellectually without signifying that they ever appear separately on a concrete level. "Motion" and "mover" are two types of concept, formed relative to the same percepts. "Motion" as a concept refers to the abstract common character of all concrete motions, known by comparisons between them and contrasts to other things (such as restful events). "Mover" is another sort of concept, referring to a hypothetical explanation of the existence of constancies as well as variations observed in the course of motions, as above explained. Both refer back to the

51 See Appendix 1: fallacy H.

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same collection of concretes, yet each concentrates on an abstract level on a different aspect of what was perceived.

Furthermore, when Nagarjuna suggests that to say "the mover moves" implies belief that the mover can be *concretely* "separated" from the motion, and that there are "two kinds of motion" (one "in" the mover and the other "in" the moving), he is not showing commonplace theses to be fallacious, but merely attacking red-herring theses of his own interpolation. He takes advantage of the equivocation in the word separation, to confuse mental and physical, or more precisely intellectual (abstract) and phenomenal (concrete), separation. And he artificially adds a new and redundant third concept to those of motion and mover, referring to motion "in" each of them – although we never ordinarily regard motion as *itself* moving[52] or a mover as having a motion *besides* the motion by virtue of which he is labeled a mover.

Thus, both horns of Nagarjuna's dilemma are based on mere equivocations, and therefore unfounded.[53]

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52 This is not to be confused with the concept of acceleration, i.e. change of velocity.

53 See Appendix 1: fallacies F and B.

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Finally, let us examine **argument 6(e)**. Here again, Nagarjuna is playing on words. Certainly, as his first premise remarks, we cannot without self-contradiction say that "the mover rests" – but we can consistently say that that which was *previously* moving is *now* resting. The label "mover" is not forever fixed once applied to something, but applicable only so long as that thing is considered in motion; thereafter, a new label must be applied to it, that of "thing at rest". Nagarjuna himself admits this in the next breath, when he argues "when someone stops moving, he is not the mover anymore". He adduces this to deny that "the mover rests when he stops moving", and then goes on to define rest as "cessation of motion", again contradicting himself. But anyway, "rest" does not exactly mean *cessation* of motion, it refers more broadly to *absence* of motion. Cessation is a special case of absence, and not co-extensive with it; something may be at rest *without precedent* motion as well as after motion.

In his second premise, aiming to deny that the "non-mover rests", he conversely implies that the "non-mover" was not previously moving and so could not have ceased to move and so cannot be at rest. But we can reply without self-

contradiction that something may well be a non-mover at present, and yet have been a mover in the past (who ceased to move); or that anyway he may be at rest now without having in the past moved and then stopped moving. Our concept of time is built precisely to deal with such issues. The label non-moving is not inalienable, but tied to actual situations of rest and inappropriate in all other situations; moreover, the concepts and labels of "non-moving" and "rest" are intended as identical (mere synonyms, and antonyms of "moving" and non-rest").

All these comments are of course obvious to everyone, but have to be made here to show point-by-point the tragicomedy of Nagarjuna's word-games. Both premises of Nagarjuna's dilemma are dissolved, being based on unfair fixation of terms.[54]

With regard to **argument 6(f)**. Nagarjuna here recalls his earlier arguments against motion, and infers from their alleged conclusion that motion is impossible, that cessation of motion, and therefore rest, are likewise impossible. We can answer: indeed, if there was no motion, there would be

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54 See Appendix 1: fallacies H and B.

no cessation of motion; but since motion was not successfully disproved, it cannot be inferred that cessation of motion has also been disproved. Furthermore, even if motion and cessation of motion were disproved, it would not follow that rest is impossible or unknowable, for rest is a genus of both "cessation of motion" *and* "never in motion", and to deny one species does not necessitate denial of the other (or else denial of anything would imply denial of everything).[55] In short, if there was no motion in the world, it would just follow that everything is at rest – the universe would simply be static[56].

Thus, Nagarjuna's cunning attempt to deny rest as well as motion, and thereby to invalidate "dualistic" reason and impose a "non-dualistic" consciousness, is easily disabled. Both motion and rest remain conceivable and consistent theses; his "logic" is fake throughout. Nevertheless, we must address his last assumption, that (as Cheng puts it) "motion and rest are relative to each other". Let us here generously ignore his specification of rest as cessation of motion, and consider the term properly to mean non-motion, because the

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55 See Appendix 1: fallacy C.

56 A vision seemingly adopted by Parmenides, incidentally.

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issue is important and moot. I have stated that motion has to be accepted as undeniable empirical evidence, because *even if an apparent motion is judged illusory and not real, it remains classifiable as motion.*

> We cannot explain-away (perceived) physical motion by supposing that it might be a figment of imagination, for we would still have to admit or explain-away the imaginary motion that we have by our very supposition posited as existing. "Imaginary motion" signifies a movement of projected mental entities – that *too* is a perceived, concrete event (differing from "physical" motion only in respect of presumed underlying location, substance and possible genesis – occurring "in the head", made of some "mental" stuff, and perhaps "generated by the perceiver"). We might try to explain imaginary motion away too, by claiming that both physical and mental motion are "verbal constructs", i.e. that motion is a word without reference to a concrete experience of any kind, but defined by putting together previous words. But this would just mean that we regard motion as abstract, conceived – whereas, we clearly

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> *concretely perceive* motions. The *experience* of motion has to be admitted, we cannot ignore it. Whether this experience is imaginary or physical is another (conceptual) issue, which does not affect it.[57]

Now, the question arises, is *rest* equally evident? *Prima facie*, my answer would be: yes. Our experiences include not only appearances of motion but also appearances of rest. Whether perceived rest is at a conceptual level real or illusory is irrelevant; that it is perceived suffices to qualify it as empirical evidence. Here again, to claim that the concept of rest is based on a mental projection on dynamic physical phenomena, does not invalidate the concept, for we are still left within that thesis with the experience of static mental phenomena. Unfortunately, when we formulate theories of motion, in a bid to understand it, two broad hypotheses emerge:

- One (the "divisionist" theory) is that motion is *infinitely divisible*, so that there is no time at which the moving thing (be it physical or mental) is at rest. This theory does not in itself exclude the possibility of rest, since it leaves

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[57] See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

open the possibility that there are times and places devoid of motion; it only specifies that, at least *when and where* motion occurs, it is infinitely divisible.

- The other (the "atomist" theory) is that motion is *discrete* or "atomic", a fitful succession of *instantaneous* motions and *momentary* rests. According to this theory, motion as such takes no time (an instant is a point in time), only rest takes time (a moment is a duration of time). When something moves, it exists first in one place then in quite another *without traversing intermediate places.* The moving thing can never be said to have *stopped existing* momentarily, i.e. for any duration of time, since it switched places instantaneously, i.e. in zero amount of time.

Both these theories are compatible with rest, as well as motion. But the second one *implies* rest as real, whereas the first one only *allows for* rest as real. Many philosophers, including Nagarjuna as a Buddhist[58], go one step further and regard that *everything is really in constant flux*, so that rest is only (somehow) illusory. This thesis, note well, is a possible

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[58] We have already cited Heraclitus as the first Western philosopher known to have done so.

though not necessary offshoot of the first proposition, and logically implies it since not compatible with the second. Now, we cannot simply deny it as an arbitrary generalization, because it has a lot going for it in a large context of empirical and rational considerations. Namely, it seems implied by modern physics, which seems to reduce everything to wave motions (fields), and this idea in turn (generalized beyond the physical realm) provides us with a neat explanation of "universals" (i.e. abstracts) as the shapes and measures of the waves constituting all things[59].

So we have to conceive some respect in which rest might differ from motion experientially, so that although both are indubitably phenomenal (perceived, concrete, experiential, empirical), whether on a physical or mental level, we can still label the one illusory and the other real. We might propose that physical rest is only *superficially* apparent, due to our sensory inability to observe the motion which constantly underlies it; that is, *because our sense-organs are limited in the degree of detail they allow us to perceive – limited in both*

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[59] It might be that waves and universals can be assimilated by an atomist theory, but to my knowledge no one has tried and succeeded in doing this – so in the meantime we may assume it cannot be done.

space and time – we only perceive fragments of physical reality and those fragments we fail to perceive we treat as absent. Similarly with regard to imaginary entities (i.e. mental projections) – we may not be perceiving all their details.

This thesis is credible and consistent, and indeed confirmed by various experiments. It does not appeal to a concept of illusion based on the mind-body distinction, but rather to an "optical illusion" effect (not limited to the visual field, but analogously applicable to all the sense-modalities, and to imagination). It does not say that what we perceive is wrong (which would lead to self-contradiction), but only that we do not perceive everything that is there (conceptual considerations may suggest this without self-contradiction). The issue is, does this thesis succeed in differentiating experienced rest from experienced motion, condemning the one as illusory and justifying the other as real?

We might succeed, by saying that every (perceived) fragment of (infinitely divisible) motion is still motion, whereas a (perceived) fragment of rest may upon further division be found to conceal underlying motion. Thus, although both motion and rest are undeniably present on the perceptual

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level (in both the material and the mental phenomenal fields), we may still on a conceptual level give the one ontological precedence over the other. The Atomist hypothesis implies both motion and rest to be equally real, but the hypothesis of Divisionism only demands that motion be real, allowing for the possibility that rest be real (limited or moderate version) or unreal (general or extreme version). We can thus conceptually 'explain away' the phenomenon of rest as imperfectly perceived motion. Since the perception of rest is not dismissed, but only conceptually 'reduced' from rest to motion that has been only roughly experienced, this is epistemologically acceptable.

Let us now return to Nagarjuna's premise that "motion and rest are relative to each other". He does not ultimately believe in either motion or rest, remember, but considers these concepts tied within ordinary consciousness. In the light of our above analysis, we have to deny such a strong relationship between these concepts. It is possible to affirm both motion and rest, conceptually (through "moderate divisionism" or "atomism") as well as empirically – although we may choose not to adopt this course for various reasons (such as our need for a theory of "waves" in Physics or a

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theory of "universals" in Philosophy). It is also possible to affirm motion, while denying rest – we have just done so, with reasonable consistency, at least on a hypothetical level (in "extreme divisionism"). A world in universal and continuous flux seems conceivable, even while admitting the empirical status of both motion and rest, by considering the coarseness or graininess of the objects of perception. We cannot, however, affirm rest and deny motion, or deny both rest and motion; motion must be in any case affirmed.[60]

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[60] Concepts like motion and rest, or like space and time, do not concern abstracts. All our discussion, note well, has revolved around concretes; abstracts are ultimately just measures or degrees of these. As concretes come and go, so in a sense do their abstract features (since features are tied to what they feature, being but aspects of them) – but we regard two similar concretes as having not two but *one* abstract in common. That is the whole point of abstraction: *to ignore plurality and concentrate on unity.* We might however talk of change of an abstract, when the underlying concretes have changed so radically that they no longer display a certain abstract in common. For example, water may be changed into hydrogen and oxygen; the result is no longer water but other chemicals; in contrast, when liquid water is changed to steam, it remains water.

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7. Causality.

Causality is a central concept in Buddhism. In Western philosophy, the term is applied generically to causation (a relation of "constant conjunction" between any two events[61] – physical events, and likewise "psychological" events) and to volition (the relation between a conscious being and an action willed by it). For Indian and Buddhist philosophy, an additional connotation of causality is the moral concept that has become colloquial in the West under the name of *karma* (the belief that good deeds are ultimately rewarded and bad deeds punished, whether in a present lifetime or a later one – and indeed that we have to be reborn to bear the consequences of our actions, at least until we find "liberation" from this cycle). Buddhism additionally (and if I am not mistaken, originally and exclusively) has a concept of "co-dependency" (according to which, roughly put, nothing

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[61] These events may each be positive or negative; we shall clarify this further on. The point to note here is that cause or effect here may be motions or qualities, and their purported relation is "mechanistic".

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stands on its own, but everything exists only by virtue of its direct or indirect causal interrelationships with other things).

A definition of causality traditionally cited in Buddhism is[62]: "When this is, that is; this arising, that arises; when this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases." It is an excellent definition of causation, or more precisely the strongest type of causation – namely *complete and necessary causation*. It is better than the definition "constant conjunction", proposed by some Western philosophers, which only refers to complete causation[63]. But the said traditional formula is not accurate. First because there are other, *weaker* types of causation,

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62 For this formula, see p. 84. The discussion of Nagarjuna's treatment of causality is found mainly in pp. 83-88. Cheng there refers to MT XV:1a,2a,2b, XVII:1-33, XX:1-4,16-17, XXIV:18,40, and *Hui-cheng-lun*, 72, as well as to TGT I-III.

63 I am thinking of Hume, who (as I recall) apparently only refers to constant conjunctions of positive events, say A and B, failing to consider the flip side of constant conjunction between their negations, non-A and non-B. He also ignores (as do Buddhists, in the said definition) "hindrance", i.e. cases of constant conjunction between A and non-B, and between non-A and B. Of course, if all such cases of causation are considered as implicitly intended in the expression "constant conjunction", then it is equally acceptable. J. S. Mill's later treatment is much better, though also it has its faults. Note additionally, that "when this is, that is; when this is not, that is not" seem to logically imply "this arising, that arises; this ceasing, that ceases", so that the latter is redundant as definition, though well to point out and remember.

namely, complete but contingent, partial though necessary, and neither complete nor necessary – and derivatives of these. And second, because causation does not include volition. In truth, if we study the actual descriptions of "co-dependency" in Buddhist texts, it is easy to see that the causal relations referred to do not all fall under the stated definition of causality (as "when this is, that is", etc.) but range far more widely over the many other senses of the term.

For earlier Buddhists, and Buddhists of other schools, causality is an objective fact, which gives rise to and implies "co-dependency" and thence "emptiness". But for Nagarjuna and his school, all these concepts and tenets are ultimately mere "conventional" truths, without real validity. Thus, although they are Buddhist doctrines, and he admits their value as initial teaching tools, he regards it as necessary to ultimately disown them, so as to go beyond the discourse they involve, into non-discursive consciousness of actual emptiness. For him, it is useless and counterproductive to talk about emptiness, to analyze and reason it – it has to be lived. It should not surprise us, therefore, that he tries to disprove causality, to show all concepts of it to be confused and absurd.

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(a) Let us first consider Nagarjuna's argument concerning "production", as presented by Cheng[64]. It has the same dilemmatic form as some of his arguments about motion and rest. He divides the "process of production" into three parts. The part "already produced" is "finished" and the part "yet to be produced" is "not yet"; so neither of these can be "established". The part "being produced" can be "established" only if the aforementioned two parts have been; so it too cannot be "established". Hence, "the act of producing is impossible"; and therefore, "there cannot be a producer". They are both "unreal" and "involve contradictions or absurdities".

We can reply as follows. For a start, let us note that Nagarjuna (in Cheng's account, at least) does not even define what he means by "production", he merely takes the term for granted. The full causal connotation of the term is admittedly hard if not impossible to define (no one, to my knowledge, has so far succeeded in doing so), but I submit that no concept can definitely be proved or disproved without some

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64 On p. 37.

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definition, so we can doubt Nagarjuna's "refutation" of production on this ground alone. But let us, like him, take the term as understood (I do suggest a working definition further on), and consider his reasoning anyway.

The first two premises typically rely on a possible confusion in the reader between the present tense ("the act of producing") and the past and future tenses ("already" and "yet to be" produced). Of course, if we artificially freeze the present tense in the present, as he does, we cannot find ("establish") it in the past or future tenses.[65] But if we consider the past as having once been the present or the future as the eventual location of the present, there is no difficulty in saying that "the act of producing" *was in what is now and since then* classed as "already produced" or *will be in what is now and until then* classed as "yet to be produced". The reasons he gives in his two premises, "it is "finished" and it is "not yet", beg the question and do not constitute proof that production cannot be "established" outside the present.

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65 See Appendix 1: fallacy H.

His third premise, that the "act of producing" can be "established" in the present only by being so in the past and future, is gratuitous[66], and only serves to again demonstrate that his conclusions are foregone. Why would we need to refer to past or future, to *infer* the present situation? We can well find the "act of producing" directly in the present, by *empirical* means. Watching someone go through certain motions, which are exclusively and invariably[67] followed by certain perceived changes in his environment, we name the someone "producer", his motions "production", and the changes "products" (this sentence, by the way, can serve as an inchoate definition). Clearly, when I say this is empirical, I mean empirically-based. The statistical reasoning involved, and many other underlying presuppositions such as memory of past instances and comparison between instances, are conceptual and logical. We cannot establish production by means of a *single* present perception, but have to appeal to

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66 See Appendix 1: fallacy D.

67 To repeat, "exclusively and invariably" (making possible and necessary) is only the strongest case; weaker causations include exclusively but not invariably (only making possible), invariably but not exclusively (only making necessary), and others (partial contingent causation, i.e. conditional causation).

past perceived instances and ensure that future perceived instances keep concurring. Nevertheless, all that is more direct than what Nagarjuna proposes.

In sum, Nagarjuna's argument is merely an attempt to delude us, and in no way justifies his conclusion against the concept of production. As for the concept of producer, further discussion is required. I have already, higher up, discussed one issue involved, that of the existence of a substratum to *motion* – for the producer is conceived as an abiding entity. But of course, we also have to here point to the implied issue of *causality*. The term production is colloquially applied even to a machine, but ultimately it signifies human invention, initiation and supervision of a process – that is, consciousness and will. A machine is merely a *tool* of production, not a producer – the latter term only properly applies to human beings (or entities with similar powers). But we need not try to deal with this more difficult issue here, as it does not arise in the context of Nagarjuna's above argument.

(b) Another argument of Nagarjuna's relates to whether an effect is "real in" or "unreal in" a cause ("or an assemblage of causes and conditions"). The meaning of this question will become apparent as we develop

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his answer. For him, the question is fourfold, not just twofold – the effect might also be "both real and unreal in" or "neither real nor unreal in" the cause (see discussion of the tetralemma, above). Cheng relates his argument as follows. First premise: "if an effect is real in a cause," it does not need to be "produced again" – "there cannot be causal production" since "nothing new is produced" in such case. Second premise: "if an effect is at the outset unreal in a cause and yet is produced by a cause, then in principle anything should be capable of being produced from anything else" – "there would be no particular or distinct relation between the two, and hence one would not be the cause of the other." Third premise: an effect cannot be "both real and unreal in" a cause, "because real and unreal are contradictory in nature" and such things cannot be "together". Fourth premise: "to say that an effect is neither real nor unreal in a cause is tantamount to accepting that there is no causal relation between cause and effect." Conclusion: "none of these can be

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> **established, and thus theories of causality should be renounced."**

Many objections can be raised to this argument. For a start, we can again point out that Nagarjuna (or perhaps only Cheng) does not define causality precisely – so how can he succeed in disproving it? Similarly, the expressions "real in" and "unreal in" are left very vague. Nevertheless, we can rephrase his question as, more clearly: is the effect already *present* or not in the cause? His first two premises are then: if yes, it did not need to be caused; if no, how could it have been caused? My answer is this: Nagarjuna is ignoring or obscuring the (very Aristotelian) distinction between merely *potential* presence and *actual* presence.[68] We can say that the effect is to some degree present, in the sense of potential, in the cause; it only becomes fully present, in the sense of actual, under appropriate conditions.

> For example: a healthy woman has in her womb, potentially but not actually, sons, grandsons, etc. Concretely, that potential has actual expression in her physiological characteristics (womb, eggs, genetic

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68 See Appendix 1: fallacy F.

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> make-up, etc.); but her descendants are still not actual; they are *actualized* only when and if certain existential and biological conditions are met (she remains alive long enough, she has intercourse and is fertilized, she bears a son, then her son in turn finds a woman, and so forth). The woman is not the *complete* "cause", in any case (other factors come into play, positively or negatively); the son, grandson, etc. are not *to the same degree* her "effects" (her son is more of an effect of hers than her grandson, etc.) since more and more conditions have to be met.

These concepts are quite reasonable, so Nagarjuna's attempted denial cannot be upheld. Furthermore, note that the things we call the "cause" and the "effect" do not merit this label *until and unless* causality takes place (and is known to have done so); it is only after such event that the terms become applicable, so that it is absurd to apply them to things while denying such event, as Nagarjuna tries.[69] Also, it is important to clarify what we mean by "the" cause or "the" effect. Nagarjuna focuses on one of the conditions involved

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69 See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

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(in the example given, a woman), and ignores the others (her healthy fertilization; successive generations of women and their fertilizations, in turn); likewise, he does not distinguish between direct effects (her son) and indirect ones (her grandsons, etc.).

Thus, his first two premises are misleading – for an effect is potentially present in a cause, in the sense that certain conditions are actual in it; but the effect is not actually present in that cause, because certain additional conditions are not actual in it. When the latter conditions are actualized, they – together with the already actual former conditions – cause actualization of the effect. The sum of the earlier and later conditions may be referred to as “the” cause; whereas each of these sets of conditions can only properly be referred to as “one of the causes”; each is only *a potential* cause without the other. Similarly, we have to distinguish between an effect of this total cause, and an effect of an effect of it, and an effect of an effect of an effect of it, etc. In each case, additional conditions come into play, and what was admitted *the* cause of the earlier effect, may only be regarded as *a* cause (among others) of the later effect. Nagarjuna uses the

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terms cause and effect without any effort at precision[70]; is it no wonder then that he formulates false premises.[71]

With regard to his claim in the first premise that "nothing new is produced", then, we would reply that there is novelty in the intensification of existence from a inchoate, potential degree to an overt, actual degree. As for the reasoning he uses in his second premise, the following may be offered as rebuttal.

He argues that if an effect were not present at the outset in a cause, then any other effect might "in principle" emerge from the cause, so that in fact no relation would exist between the cause and any such effect. To make the issue clearer, let us remove the terms cause and effect from the sentence, since as already stated they may not be used before a causal relation is established. Indeed, "in principle" a thing might be accompanied or followed by just anything. This only means that, at first glance, before any data has been gathered, we

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70 It is interesting to note that Cheng earlier (on p. 85) mentions, parenthetically, that a cause may be understood as "an assemblage of causes and conditions". For it shows that Nagarjuna is aware that a cause is not necessarily monolithic, and indeed this awareness is found in Buddhist doctrine from its inception.

71 See Appendix 1: fallacy E.

must have an open mind and look at the facts without prejudice, without anticipation – this is the *epistemological* principle he seems to be referring to, and the one we would admit. He cannot be taken to appeal to an *ontological* principle, that everything occurs by happenstance, without connection to anything else – for that would be begging the question, surely. But of course, Nagarjuna cunningly obscures the wide and deep gulf between these two senses of the term "in principle" to make his point.[72]

But this is in itself interesting, because it shows that he is quite aware of the reason why we formulate a concept of causality and believe in it, and of the inductive process through which such a relation is established. *If* we lived in a world (or field of appearances, to be more precise) where, indeed, anything could happen, i.e. a world without any regularity, *then* we would have no basis for a concept of causality, and no such concept would even occur to us.[73] *But* we notice in our experience that some things are constantly conjoined (and so forth – this is just one of the many types of regularity), and *therefore* – in order to record and explain

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72 See Appendix 1: fallacy F.

73 See Appendix 1: fallacy G.

such uniformities in our experience – we form a concept of causality. Furthermore, we use these very same observed regularities to determine whether or not the label of causality may be applied in particular cases. There is thus nothing arbitrary in the concept, nor in its applications; it is experience that suggests it, and experience that establishes it.

There is nothing circular in the concept, either. Nagarjuna denies that causation can be established with reference to experience, saying that this "begs the question"[74]. Even though "we have seen sesame produce sesame oil, but have never seen sand produce sesame oil," we are not justified to "seek sesame oil in sesame but not in sand" because "causation or production has not yet been established, and so one cannot legitimately make that claim." But as just explained, this is not *the order of things* in knowledge. Both the concept and its particular applications come from the same experiences. We have a concept of causation because we observe regularities and these same regularities tell us where to apply it. There is no basis for a demand that the concept be known independently of experience. The reason

74 Cheng, p. 87.

why the concept seems to exist "independently" of *any one* of its empirical instances, is that it is the common feature of *many and indeed all* instances of regularity, and does not merely refer to *the one* regularity under scrutiny at one particular time.

Thus, Nagarjuna should have said the following: if some *thing* and another *thing* are *always* apparent together and *never* apparent apart, then we may call the one "cause" and the other "effect" and their relation to each other "causality" (this is only the strongest form of causation, to repeat, but I do not want to needlessly complicate the issue here); but if *no such regularity* (nor a lesser degree of regularity) occurs in their appearances (i.e. our experience of them, in a first phase, and by generalization, their existences), then they cannot be called thus. Had he formulated the sentence in this way, he would have had no argument. He chose to confuse the issue or was himself confused, by anticipating application of causal terminology, and by failing to distinguish between epistemological and ontological aspects.

Let us turn now to his last two premises. They logically add nothing to the present argument about causality, but they are interesting as denials by Nagarjuna himself of his previously

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expressed or implied views about the tetralemma (see higher up). Here, he admits that contradictories (like “real in” and “unreal in”) cannot “be together”. Likewise, he admits that negative contradictories in conjunction (like “not real in” and “not unreal in”) are not a further kind of meaningful relation (in the present case, a “causal relation”). This shows that he understands the Laws of Non-contradiction and the Law of the Excluded Middle, and appeals to them when he finds it convenient for his ends. It makes us, once again, doubt his sincerity.

(c) Cheng lists another five issues concerning causal relations raised by Nagarjuna, but does not present the latter’s arguments about them, other than to say that he “criticized each relation more or less the same way.” We may infer from this that Nagarjuna tried to show, using his usual methods, these various questions about causality unanswerable or absurd in some way. The questions he asked were the following.

- **Is a cause “identical” or “different” to an effect?**
- **Do a cause and an effect “appear simultaneously” or not?**
- **Does a cause “become” an effect or not?**

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- **Does a cause "before it ceases to be, give a causal nature to" an effect or not?**
- **Is a cause "within" an effect or is an effect "within" a cause?**

Let us consider what his arguments might be, and how we would answer his questions and preempt his skeptical conclusions.

With regard to the first issue, my guess is that Nagarjuna would argue, as he did in similar circumstances[75], that if cause and effect are "identical" there is no point in naming them distinctively, and if they are "different" there can be no connection between them. But we can easily reply that they are not identical, and that difference does not imply disconnection.

With regard to the second issue, knowing Nagarjuna, he would presumably complain that if two things appear simultaneously we cannot regard one as causing the other; and if they do not appear simultaneously, how can we establish that they are linked? Philosophers who insist that causality requires that the effect *temporally* follow the cause,

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[75] With regard to the subject-predicate relation, in argument 4(a), and the object-characteristics relation, in argument 5(d).

are focusing on one mode of causal relation, that in dynamic process (as for instance, in natural causation); but in truth, we also commonly acknowledge static causal relations (in the extensional mode)[76], and even simultaneous events in dynamic processes may be causally ordered. It is only after we have established that two things, features or events are *regularly* together and/or apart to some degree, and therefore causally related, that the decision as to which to regard as cause and which as effect arises. This issue may in some cases be quickly resolved with reference to time's arrow: the cause is the temporally earlier, the effect is the temporally later. But this is only one resolution, the simplest case. If the two items are simultaneous, we can still order them on other, more conceptual grounds. For instance, we will consider the more generic item as cause, the more specific as effect,

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76 That this is acknowledged in Buddhism is evident in the traditional definition of causality earlier mentioned. The statements "when this is, that is; when this is not, that is not" refer to static causation; the statements "this arising, that arises; this ceasing, that ceases" refer to dynamic causation. These statements are (I seem to remember and presume) attributed to the Buddha himself in some sutra, and demonstrate commendable precision of thought. Static and dynamic causation may be viewed as two aspects of the same relation, or we may view the latter as a special case of the former (since given the former, we can infer the latter).

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judging the former as a 'deeper' (more widely present) aspect of nature than the latter.

With regard to the third issue, I am not sure what Nagarjuna means by a cause becoming an effect (or not). Perhaps he is referring to the frequently used Buddhist image of a seed becoming a plant? I would guess in such case that he plays on the ambiguity of the word "plant", i.e. on whether it refers to any of its stages (including as a seed) or to a developed plant (excluding the seed). If so, we can forewarn that the word 'becoming' has two colloquial senses: a stronger sense of mutation (for which let us reserve the same word) and a weaker sense of alteration (for which let us prefer the expression 'getting to be'). In mutation, the change is from 'X and not Y' to 'Y and not X'; whereas in alteration, it is from 'X and not Y' to 'X and Y'[77]. Thus, in our example, the plant is initially a seed, then 'gets to be' a developed plant; or, in other words, the seed (undeveloped plant) 'becomes' a developed plant.

The fourth question is likewise unclear – what does he mean by the cause "giving causal nature to" the effect? I presume

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77 See my *Future Logic*, ch. 17.

the pronoun in "before *it* ceases to be" refers to the cause, and that he is asking whether some sort of power of causation is *transferred* from cause to effect in causal chains. If that is his concept, or the concept he attributes to ordinary thinking, I would beg to differ. We do not regard that, in all causal chains, cause A gives its effect B the power to be cause B of effect C, i.e. that A does not merely cause B, but also *causes B to cause* C. This may be true when both the successions A-B and B-C are invariable, i.e. in the one case of *complete* causation; for in such case, we may say that A is invariably followed by both B and C, i.e. that A causes C as well as B. But this is one special case of regular succession – when the causations involved are of mixed determination, the syllogism is not always possible. Furthermore, in some instances (where A is not a necessary cause of B) it is still possible for "B causes C" to occur in the absence of A, when B is caused by something other than A.

One might anyway wonder at the legitimacy of an *iterative* causal concept "causing to cause", in the above implied sense, for we regard "B causes C" as a relation and event that just "is", a *fact* of ("caused by", if you like) "Nature" – not as something that something else (viz. "A"), itself *within* nature,

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might "cause". The iterative concept occurs somewhat legitimately in volitional situations, where we may say that an agent A (a person) influences or forces another, B, to perform some action, C. But in such cases, the causality involved is very different, clearly. 'A influences B' is a sort of causality, but it does not mean A causes B in the sense of causation. Nor is 'B does C' a causation, but a volition. So in this case, the iterative concept is quite different in meaning.

As for the fifth issue, I presume we have already dealt with the question as to whether the effect is "within" the cause when we discussed whether the effect is "real in" the cause. So only the question, is a cause "within" an effect? remains to be answered. Supposedly Nagarjuna has in mind here some kind of lingering existence of the cause in its effect. This could be conceived, and is indeed used as an explanatory hypothesis in some causal situations. Thus, Newton's theory of motion of physical bodies after impact postulates that "energy" is the substratum of motion; the first body's motion is an expression of the energy in it, and when it hits the other some or all of that energy is passed on to the second, which therefore moves or changes velocity and/or direction in accord with precise formulas. This theory

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involves calculated predictions, which are empirically confirmed[78]. In this context, the second body is caused to move by the first, but the underlying cause of both their motions is "energy".

In that case, we might say to Nagarjuna that we have a case in point, where the cause is "within" the effect. I do not, however, think that this is necessarily or always appropriate, in every causal relation, or even in every causation, to say that the cause is "within" the effect. For we establish causation primarily with reference to constant conjunction of presences and/or absences of two things, without prejudice as to whether some third thing is passed on from the one to the other. For us, causation is at first just a happenstance of regularity observed in the field of appearances. A theory may later be inductively established that some sort of transfer always occurs in it, but this would at best be a generalization warranted by confirmed predictions, not a deductive necessity. We should at least remain open-minded to either outcome in principle.

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[78] Later, the energy transfer idea is found valuable in other contexts or domains. Later still, be it said in passing, the theory is corrected by Einstein, for greater empirical precision.

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In sum, having with reference to his five vague questions anticipated Nagarjuna's possible additional arguments against causality, we can safely say that his intended refutations of the concept are here again likely to be fallacious and inconclusive.

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8. Co-dependence.

- **One further argument mentioned by Cheng[79] goes like this: Nagarjuna questions the legitimacy of an "ontological interpretation of causation" that claims "an entity which has essential nature" can be "something which is caused". In his view such claim is contradictory, for "an entity is supposed to have essential nature and a thing of essential nature is not produced but independent of other things" and "to be caused is to be conditioned or to be dependent".**

This argument evidently refers back to the belief of Indian philosophers that an existent is either permanent and uncaused or momentary and caused. But these temporal and causal notions are not as tied together as Indian philosophers assumed. If we look at their actual genesis in the formation of human knowledge, we see that they in principle allow for intermediate combinations, like "caused and henceforth permanent" or "momentary yet uncaused".

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79 See pp. 87-88. Cheng there refers to MT XV:1a,2a,2b, XVII:1-33, XXIV:18, and *Hui-cheng-lun*, 72, as well as to TGT II.

Furthermore, the concepts of “entity” and “essence” are very confused in Nagarjuna’s and the Buddhist mind. They do not fully realize that these concepts refer to continuities, individual (in the case of “entity”) or collective (in the case of “essence”), which are assumed so as to register and explain experienced repetition of objects. These are not mysterious, arbitrary inserts in the course of human knowledge, but statistical tools for recording and comprehending certain pluralities of experience.

In attacking causality, Nagarjuna effectively also attacks the Buddhist concept of co-dependence, which is normally considered one of the main bases for, or the causal expression of, the fact and doctrine of “emptiness”. Here, as elsewhere, he is not antipathetic to Buddhist belief, but convinced that only by disowning all concepts and doctrines – including causality and co-dependence – can we in fact get in contact with what they merely point to. The finger pointing at something, however accurately, gets in the way and distracts us from that thing, and is therefore best dropped.

Let us venture more deeply into the Buddhist doctrines at issue. I cannot here engage in their detailed analysis, thorough treatment requires a whole book (see my

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forthcoming publication on causal logic). But I will make a few pointed remarks. The Buddha was previously understood as regarding all phenomena as mutually causally related, interdependent, 'co-dependent' – suspended together in the field of appearance without underlying causes and unable to exist in it without mutual sustenance.

Admittedly, all that we perceive is a succession of present phenomenal fields. But by means of our rational faculty, we then subdivide such overall phenomena into constituent phenomena (discernment), and by comparison and contrast find them same or different in various respects and degrees (abstraction), and thereby variously group and name them (classification), and then interrelate them (e.g. causally, with reference to perceived regularities). Such rational work is admittedly hypothetical, but that does not mean it is automatically false. It does not have the same epistemological status as empirical evidence, but may be relied on with various degrees of probability, to the extent that it takes such evidence into account and is guided and regulated by the three Laws of Thought, and the rules of deductive and inductive logic derivable from them.

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Our belief in "entities", as already explained, arises in order to explain the apparent similarities between phenomena that have succeeded and replaced each other in our experience. Such phenomena are partly different (changed), but also partly the same (abiding). If they were only different, we would have no call for a concept of "entity"; but because they are also the same, we do need such a concept to register the fact. Note that sometimes, assumption of an "entity" underlying perceived phenomena is reference to an *additional, not yet perceived* phenomenon; other times, assumption of an entity is simply reference to a collection of already perceived phenomena, i.e. the entity is *no more than the conjunction* those phenomena. Once thus understood, the concept of entity is seen to have nothing antithetical to a positivistic approach to knowledge.

Similarly with our belief in "essences", which arises in response to our experiences of similarity as well as difference between phenomena, even in static situations. If, in our experience, nothing resembled anything else (extreme multiplicity) or if everything seemed identical with everything (extreme uniformity), the thought of "essences" would not even dawn on us. Assumption of an "essence",

once we demystify it and remove its idealistic connotations, and understand it as an expression of work of comparison, it loses the scarecrow status given it in Buddhist epistemology.

“Causality”, as we have already shown, may be similarly justified with reference to regularities of conjunction of phenomena (or more precisely, their presences and/or their absences). Thus, these fundamental concepts have empirical basis, they are not merely arbitrary constructs.

Now, let return to Nagarjuna’s ideas. One of them is that *an entity or essence cannot come and go or be caused*. It has to be seen that this is a particular (not to say, peculiar) thesis *proposed* by Indian philosophers, and not one inherent in the concepts involved. This proposition is not analytically obvious, and may only be regarded as an additional hypothesis to be synthetically established. It is not deducible from the initial conceptions, which (as above described) refer to various sorts of uniformities or regularities; it would have to be demonstrated by induction (grounded in some sort of empirical evidence) that these uniformities and regularities *coincide* as proposed. Otherwise, it is arbitrary (from our ordinary consciousness point of view, though it may be obvious to enlightened consciousness).

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The initial concept of an entity only stipulates continuity in the midst of change; it does not preempt that such assumed substratum as a whole may itself appear or be generated, or disappear or be destroyed. Indeed, the fact that we commonly speak of entities as limited in time and as susceptible to initiation or termination shows that we do not ordinarily view entities so rigidly. For example, those who believe in a soul may view it as naturally arising (an epiphenomenon of matter) or as divinely created (an injection into matter), as temporary or eternal (in past and/or future) – the concept of soul leaves such issues open to debate. Similarly, the initial concept of an essence only requires that the abstract exist wherever and whenever the concretes it is attached to exist; when and where the concretes come or go or are caused to come or go, the abstract may in a sense be said to similarly behave or be affected (though strictly speaking such concepts are inapplicable to abstracts, as already discussed).

Another Buddhist idea, that of 'co-dependence', which might stated broadly as *each thing exists only in relation to others;* and furthermore, since each other thing in turn exists only in relation to yet others, *each thing exists in relation to all the others.* The relation primarily intended here is causality, note.

We tend to regard each thing as capable of solitary existence in the universe, and ignore or forget the variegated threads relating it to other things. We 'do not see the forest for the trees', and habitually focus on individual events to the detriment of overview or long view.

> For example, consider a plant. Without the sunlight, soil and water it depends on, and without previous generations of the same plant and the events that made reproduction possible and the trajectories of each atom constituting and feeding the plant, and without the cosmic upheavals that resulted in the existence of our planet and its soil and water and of the sun and of living matter, and so forth *ad infinitum*, there would be no plant. It has no independent existence, but stands before us only by virtue of a mass of causes and conditions. And so with these causes and conditions, they in turn are mere details in a universal fabric of being.

The concept of co-dependence is apparently regarded by Buddhists as an inevitable outcome of the concept of causality. But reflection shows, again, that this doctrine is only a particular thesis within the thesis of causality. That is,

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though co-dependence implies causality, causality does not imply co-dependence. Moreover, it is a vague thesis, which involves some doubtful generalizations. The above-cited typical example of co-dependence suggests three propositions:

- *everything has a cause (or is an effect),*
- *everything has an effect (or is a cause);*

and perhaps the more radical,

- *everything causes and is caused by everything.*

The first two propositions are together what we call '**the law of causality**'. It has to be seen that these propositions do not inevitably follow from the concept of causality. The latter only requires for its formation that *some* regularity of co-existence between events be found in experience, but does not in itself necessitate that *every* event in experience be found to have regular co-existence with some other event(s). The *concept* of causality is valid if it but has particular applications; the *law* of causality does not automatically follow – it is merely a *generalization* from some experiences with this property to all existents. There may well be things not found to have regular co-existents, and thence by generalization assumed to have no cause and/or no effect. A

universe in which both causality and non-causality occur is quite conceivable. Furthermore, the first proposition does not logically imply the second or vice versa – i.e. we may imagine things with causes but no further effect, and things with effects but no preceding causes.

"Early Buddhists", Cheng tells us, "believed in the principle of causality to be objectively, necessarily, eternally and universally valid." Many Western philosophers have concurred, though not all. Today, most physicists believe that, on a quantum level at least, and perhaps at the Big Bang, there are events without apparent cause. I do not know if events without effect are postulated by anyone. In any case, we see that even on the physical level "chance" is admitted as a possibility, if not a certainty. The law of causality can continue to serve us as a working principle, pressing us to seek diligently for causes and effects, but cannot in any case be regarded as an *a priori* universal truth. Causal logic has to remain open-minded, since in any case these "laws" are mere generalizations – inductive, not deductive, truths.

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Furthermore, the law of causality just mentioned is only at best a law of *causation*. Philosophers who admit of *volition*[80] cannot consistently uphold such a law as universal to all existents, but only in the 'mechanistic' domains of physical and psychological events. With regard to events involving the will, if we admit that a human being (or equivalent spiritual entity, a higher animal or God) can 'will' (somehow freely produce) a physiological event (i.e. a physical movement in his body) or a psychological event (i.e. an imagination, a mental projection), or even another soul (at least in the sense of choosing to reproduce), we have to consider this as an exception to such universal law of causation.

Also, if we consider that the Agent of will is always under the *influence* of some experience or reason, we might formulate an analogical law of causality with reference to this. But influence is not to be confused with causation; it does not determine the will, which remains free, but only

[80] And at least some Buddhists seem to. For instance, the statement in the *Dhammapada* (v.165) that "by oneself the evil is done, and it is oneself who suffers: by oneself evil is not done, and by one's Self one becomes pure. The pure and the impure come from oneself: no man can purify another" – this statement seems to imply existence of a self with responsibility for its actions.

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strengthens or weakens it, facilitating or easing its operation in a certain direction. Moreover, it is not obvious that will cannot occur 'nihilistically', without any influence; it may well be free, not only to resist influences but also to operate in the absence of any motive whatsoever. In the latter case, the law of causality would again be at best a working principle, not a universal fact that volition requires a motive.

Let us now consider the more extreme statement that 'everything causes and is caused by everything', which could be construed (incorrectly) as implied by co-dependence. To say this is effectively to say paradoxically (as Nagarjuna would no doubt have enjoyed doing!) that *nothing causes or is caused by anything* – for causality is a relation found by noticing regularities *in contrast to* irregularities. If everything were regularly co-existent with everything, we would be unable to distinguish causality in the first place. It follows that such an extreme version of the law of causality is logically untenable. Causality cannot imply that 'everything causes everything' or 'everything is caused by everything' – and to deny the latter statements does not deny the concept, note well. The concept is not derived from such a law, but independently from observation of regularities in experience;

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our ability to discern such regularities from the mass of experience implies that there are irregularities too; whence, such an extreme statement cannot be consistently upheld. We must thus admit that things do not have unlimited numbers of causes or effects.

Although 'everything causes everything' implies 'co-dependence', the latter does not imply the former; so our refutation of the wider statement does not disprove co-dependence, only one possible (extreme) view of it. My criticism of co-dependence would be the following. For a start, the doctrine presented, and the illustrations given in support of it, do not use the term causality with any precision. First, as we have suggested above, *causality, is a broad term, covering a variety of very distinct relations*:

- causation or 'mechanistic' causality within the material and mental domains, and causation itself has many subspecies;
- volition, or action by souls on the material or mental or spiritual domains, and will has many degrees of freedom; and
- influence, which refers to limitations on volition set by material or mental or spiritual entities.

The doctrine of co-dependence glosses over the profound differences between these different senses of the terms 'cause' and 'effect', using them as if they were uniform in all their applications.

Also to be included as 'causal relations' in a broader sense are the *negations* of these relations. Even if some philosopher doubts one, two or all three of these (positive) relations, he would have to consider them. Concepts of 'chance' or 'spontaneity' are not simple, and can only be defined by negating those of causality; likewise, the concept of 'determinism' requires one of 'free will'. It is only in contrast to causality concepts, that non-causality can be clearly conceived. Furthermore, co-dependence ignores that *some* things are not (positively) causally related to each other, even if they may have (positive) causal relations to other things. *That something must have* some *cause or effect, does not imply that it has* this or that *specific thing as its cause or effect; there are still things to which it is not causally related.* If everything had the same positive causal relation to everything, and no negative causal relation, there would be no such thing as causality, nothing standing out to be conceived.

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Secondly, if we consider chains (or, in discourse, syllogisms) of causal relations, we find that *the cause of a cause is not necessarily itself a cause*, or at least not in the same sense or to the same degree. For instance, with reference to causation, we can formally prove that if A is a complete cause of B and B is a complete cause of C, then A is a complete cause of C. But if A is a complete cause of B and B is a partial cause of C, it does *not* follow that A is at all a cause of C. Similarly, when we mix the types of causality (e.g. causation and volition in series), we find that causality is not readily transmitted, in the same way or at all. It is therefore logically incorrect to infer transmission of causality from the mere fact of succession of causal relations as the theory of co-dependence does.

Thirdly, those who uphold co-dependence tend to *treat both directions of causal relation as equivalent*. Thus, when they say ‘everything is causally related to everything’, they seem to suggest that being a cause and being an effect is more or less the same. But something can only be regarded as a cause of things occurring after it in time or below it in conceptual hierarchy, and as an effect of things occurring before it or above it. Upstream and downstream are not equivalent. Thus,

'interdependence' cannot be taken too literally, using 'causal relation' in a too vague sense, without attention to the distinction between causal and effectual relationship.

Fourthly, the doctrine of co-dependence suggests or calls for some sort of law(s) of causality, and as already discussed higher up, no universal or restricted law of causality is logically necessitated by the concept of causality, although such a law may be considered a hypothetical principle to be validated inductively. The concept of causality only requires that *some* causality occur, without prejudicing *how much*. So, though co-dependence implies causality, causality does not imply co-dependence.

Fifthly, the concept of 'co-dependence' is upheld in contrast and opposition to a concept of '*self-subsistence*'. Something self-subsistent would exist 'by itself', *without need of origination or support or destructibility*, without 'causal conditions'. Buddhism stresses that (apart perhaps from ultimate reality) nothing in the manifold has this property, which Buddhism claims ordinary consciousness upholds. In truth, the accusation that people commonly believe in the self-subsistence of entities is false – this is rather a construct of earlier Indian philosophy.

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People generally believe that most things have origins (which bring them into existence), and that all things once generated have static relations to other existents (an infinity of relations, to all other things, if we count both positive and negative relations as 'relations'), and that things usually depend for their continued existence on the presence or absence of other things (i.e. if some of the latter come or go, the former may go too). What is doubtful however, in my view, is the vague, implicit suggestion of the co-dependence doctrine, that *while* a thing is present, i.e. during the time of its actual existence, it has a somehow only relative existence, i.e. were it not for the other things present in that same moment, it could not stand.

This is not essentially a doctrine of relativity to consciousness or Subject (though Yogachara Buddhism might say so), note well, but an existential incapacity to stand alone. This is the aspect of co-dependence that the Western mind, or ordinary consciousness, would reject. In our world[81], *once* a thing is, and *so long as* it is, *irrespective of* the causes of its coming to be or the eventual causes of its ceasing to be,

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[81] We can, incidentally, imagine a world where only one thing exists, without anything before it, simultaneous to it or after it.

or of other things co-existing with it in time and its relationships to those things, or of its being an object of consciousness, it simply exists. It is a done thing, unchangeable historical fact, which nothing later in time can affect. It cannot be said to 'depend' on anything in the sense implied by Buddhists, because *nothing could possibly be perceived or conceived as reversing or annulling this fact.*

What Buddhism seems to be denying here is that 'facts are facts', whatever their surrounding circumstances, and whether or not they are cognized, however correctly or imperfectly. It is a denial that appearances, whatever their content and whether they be real or illusory, have *occurred.* We cannot accept such deviation from the Law of Identity.

Such considerations lead me to the conclusion that 'co-dependence' is not easy to formulate and establish, if at all. Nevertheless, I regard it as a useful 'way of looking at things', a valuable rough and ready heuristic principle. Also, to be fair, I remain open to the possibility that, at some deep level of meditative insight I have not reached, it acquires more meaning and validity.

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9. Karmic law.

Finally, let us consider Nagarjuna's comments on the moral principle of 'karma' (as we commonly call it). **He denies karmic law – for him, "necessary connections between good deeds and rewards, and bad deeds and punishments" are, as Cheng describes[82], "not objective laws in nature and society, but subjective projections of the mind".** This is of course not an argument, but a statement, so his reasoning cannot be evaluated. The statement is notable, considering the context of Indian and Buddhist belief. And again, Nagarjuna makes this statement, not out of a desire to oppose normative Buddhism, but in an attempt to be consistent with his own overall philosophical programme of consciousness beyond reason, the 'middle way'.

I will take this opportunity to make a few comments of my own regarding karma. The claim that there is moral order in the world is partly, but only partly, based on empirical

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82 See p. 88. Cheng there refers to MT XVII:1-33, XXIV:18, and *Hui-cheng-lun*, 72, as well as to TGT II.

grounds. Without prejudice as to what constitutes morality, we can agree that certain actions have certain consequences, and that some of those actions and consequences happen to be morally orderly by our standards. The 'actions' referred to are actions of a person; the so-called 'consequences' referred to are things happening to that person beyond his control.

It so happens that sometimes a person who has acted in a way he (or an observer) considers 'good' (e.g. being kind to others, or whatever) is soon after or much later a recipient of something he (or the observer) considers 'positive' for himself (e.g. health or children or wealth, whatever). Similarly, a 'bad' action may be followed by 'negative' events. In some of those cases, a causal relation may be *empirically* established between the 'action' and 'consequence', without appeal to a moral principle. For instance, the man works hard and prospers. Such cases can be considered evidence in favor of a karmic law. In other cases, however, the causal relation is *merely assumed* to occur subterraneously, because it is not empirically evident that such 'action' produces such 'consequence'. For instance, the man gives charity and prospers. It would be begging the question to use cases of the latter sort as evidence in favor of

karmic law, since it is only by assuming karmic law that we interpret the events as causally connected.

Furthermore, it so happens that sometimes, despite good actions, no positive consequences are forthcoming or only negative ones follow; or despite bad actions, no negative consequences are forthcoming or only positive ones follow. The saint suffers and the evil man enjoys. These cases are all empirical evidence *against* karmic law, granting the value judgments involved, since we are not assuming karmic law to establish the causal relations between such actions and so-called consequences (be they happenstance or evidently produced by the actions). Of course, one might mitigate this conclusion somewhat, by stating that one has to know all the life of a person because no one only suffers and no one only enjoys, and that anyway it is difficult to estimate the merits of a good deed or demerits of a bad deed.

Thus, whereas karmic law might be viewed as a generalization from the cases where actions are empirically causally connected to consequences, it cannot be inferred from the cases where such connection is not established without presuming karmic law, and it is belied by the cases where the order of things predicted by karmic law is not

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matched in experience. In order to nevertheless justify karmic law, religions may introduce the concept of rebirth, on earth as a human or other creature, or elsewhere, in heaven or in hell, suggesting that if the accounts do not balance within the current lifetime, they do in the long run balance. But again, since we have no empirical evidence of such transmigration and the process is anyway very vaguely described, such argument begs the question, making the assumption of karmic law superficially more palatable, but not providing clear concept or inductive proof of it.

Some might hang on to karmic law all the same, by arguing that what we have been calling good or bad, or positive or negative, was wrongly so called. These postulate that a set of moral standards, of virtue and value, might be found, that exactly coincide with empirically evident causal processes, or at least which are not belied by such processes. Good luck.

> But what bothers me most about the assumption of karmic law is this: *it logically implies that whoever suffers must have previously done evil.* For instance, the millions of Jews (including children) murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. This seems to me an unforgivable injustice – it is an assertion that *there*

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> *are no innocent victims of crime* and that *criminals are effectively agents of justice*! Thus, in the name of morality, in the name of moral order – merely to satisfy a 'rationalist' impulse to uphold a 'law of karma' – justice is *turned upside-down* and made to accuse the innocent and exonerate the guilty. Clearly, the idea of karmic law is inherently illogical. We have to conclude that the world functions differently than such a principle implies.

We seem to have reached, with regard to karma, the same negative conclusion as Nagarjuna, though perhaps through a different argument. If there is no karmic law, is there then no need for liberation, no utility to virtue and meditation? It does not follow. Even if souls come and go, like bubbles in water, it may be good for them to realize their true nature while they are around. 'Virtue is its own reward' and the benefits of meditation are obvious to anyone engaged in it.

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10. God and creation.

Nagarjuna sought to show[83] that it is "unintelligible to assert the existence of God as the creator or maker of the universe"[84]. He does this by means of several arguments, which I shall try to summarize, based on Cheng's account, and to evaluate. Let me say at the outset that I personally do not believe we can prove or disprove the idea of God[85], so I cannot be accused of having an ax to grind on this issue. If Nagarjuna's conclusion is deemed a disproof and denial of the concept, I am showing it erroneous. But if it is deemed a mere denial that the concept can be proved, I agree with him

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83 See Cheng, pp. 89-96 on this topic. He refers to MT XXII, as well as to TGT X, XII:1 and the last chapter.

84 Note that Nagarjuna identifies God with the Indian deity *Isvara*. Cheng wonders in passing whether this was warranted; a more accurate identification would in my view have been with the *Brahman* of Hinduism. However, this need not concern us here, for the attributes used by him to describe God correspond to those any Western philosopher would grant.

85 I normally follow a Jewish tradition that the word should be written incompletely, as "G-d" – but this has proven confusing for many people. The reason for the tradition is to avoid that the word be taken into an impure place or be physically torn or deleted.

but am showing his reasoning in favor of such conclusion logically inadequate.

(a) One argument proceeds as follows: "if there is a fact of producing, making or creating… what is produced?" It is either the "already produced" or the "not yet produced" or the "being produced". These three alternatives can, according to Nagarjuna, be "refuted in the same way as the concept of motion", whence production "cannot be established" and therefore "it makes no sense" to affirm a "creator or maker".

The pattern and content of this argument are by now familiar to us (see higher up), all Nagarjuna does here is repeat it with reference to the universe and God. But since, as we have already shown, the argument against production is logically worthless, the conclusion against creationism and God drawn from it is also without credibility.[86] But note additionally that Nagarjuna does not, as philosophers often do, make any radical distinction between "production" in the sense applicable within the universe (which is a mere reshuffling of

86 See Appendix 1: fallacy D.

preexisting elements) and "creation or making" in the sense applicable to the universe (which is *ex nihilo*, or at least a conversion of the spiritual substance of God into material and other substances).

(b) The next argument we shall review is more interesting. Let us suppose that something (symbolized by an 'x') is "made or produced by someone or something". Now, x has to be made either "by itself" or "by another" or "by both" or "by no cause". But, firstly, x cannot be made by itself, for that would imply that "it makes its own substance", and "a thing cannot use itself to make itself" for that would be "reflexive action", i.e. the thing would be "both subject and object at once," which is impossible since "subject and object are different." Secondly, x cannot be made by some other thing, because the latter would be "causal conditions" and these ought to be considered as "its substance" and so would be "the same" and not "other". It follows that x cannot be made both by itself and by another. Lastly, x cannot be made by no cause, because "there would be a fallacy of eternalism".

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It is not clear to me what or who is the subject, x, of this argument. It might be intended to be the universe or God. In either case, the argument seems to be that a thing can neither be self-created, nor be other-created, nor be both, nor be uncreated (i.e. neither). With regard to self-creation, I would agree with Nagarjuna that the concept is nonsensical. His second thesis, denying that something can be "made by another", is however not convincing. He claims that the causes or conditions of something have to be counted as part (of the substance) of that thing, so that the alleged "other" is in fact not "other" (implying that the concept of other-creation is self-contradictory). But we do not ordinarily count all "causal conditions" of a thing as part of it or of its substance; we might do so in some cases, if such antecedents are exclusive to that thing and no other factors can be used to define it, but usually we would regard them as separate events that bring it about.[87]

The third thesis, against "both" self and other creation, could be admitted offhand since we have admitted his first thesis that a thing creating itself (wholly, *ex nihilo*) is impossible.

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[87] See Appendix 1: fallacy D.

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Alternatively, we could interpret the third thesis as referring to something partly created by another, and then that part proceeding to create the remaining parts. If we so conceive Nagarjuna's third option, as other and self creation in sequence, we have to disagree that this is impossible. As for the fourth thesis, that a thing may be created by neither self nor other, i.e. may be uncreated, again two interpretations are possible. One, which Nagarjuna mentions, is that the causeless was always there; Nagarjuna considers that impossible, in accord with Buddhist doctrine that eternity is a fallacious concept, but I have seen no logical justification of that viewpoint and to my Western mind eternity (of God or of the universe) is quite conceivable. Another interpretation, which Nagarjuna apparently ignores, is that something might arise spontaneously, i.e. pop into existence out of nothing; this is an idea which some find unconscionable, but we may accept it as at least imaginable.[88]

To summarize, Nagarjuna conceives of four scenarios for creation, and claims to find reason to reject all four, concluding that the idea of God creating universe is

[88] See Appendix 1: fallacy C.

unthinkable and therefore that God is unintelligible. We, however, are not overwhelmed by his arguments. Only his rejection of self-creation makes sense. His rejection of other-creation is forced. His interpretations of "both" and "neither" are incomplete, and we can offer additional ones, which leave the issues open. The dilemma as a whole is therefore inconclusive, and Nagarjuna may not logically draw the conclusions he draws.[89] However, let us return briefly to Nagarjuna's second thesis, for he might be trying to formulate a more complex thought than appears.

Let us suppose Nagarjuna is discussing *whether God created the universe*. If we take "the universe" as an open-ended concept including whatever happens to exist at any one time, then God was himself *the whole* universe before He created *the rest of* the universe[90]. Viewing creation thusly, we are not

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89 See Appendix 1: fallacy B.

90 Cheng at one point (p. 92) recalls Bertrand Russell's argument against God and creationism – that while it is reasonable to inquire about the causes of particular phenomena, it is nonsensical to inquire about a cause for the totality of all phenomena. This is of course a very forceful argument, considering that (as we have seen) the concept of causality arises only in response to perceived regularities of conjunction between phenomena (here including in this term, as well as sensory or mental perceptions, intuitive experiences and conceptions). It is

talking about *ex nihilo* creation, which is a confused concept since it ignores or obscures the preexistence of something (God) doing the creating – but of an earlier universe, with *only* God in it, giving rise to a later universe, with God *plus* other things (matter, people with minds) in it[91]. The mystery of creation in that case is simply, how can a *spiritual* entity, such as the God we conceive, produce *matter*, either from nowhere (i.e. without self-diminishment) or out of itself (as the *tsimtsum* concept of creation of Jewish Kabbalah seems to suggest)? The latter idea, that God might have given something of Himself to fashion matter, does not seem too

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true that the search for causes of phenomena is always a search for other phenomena that might be regularly conjoined with them. But Russell's argument is not logically conclusive. For if God existed, and we could one day perceive Him (or a "part" or "aspect" of Him), He would simply be *one more* phenomenon. In which case, creation would refer not to causation of the *totality* of phenomena (by a non-phenomenon), but simply to causation by one phenomenon of *all other* phenomena – which is a quite consistent viewpoint. If "the universe" is understood in a fixed, narrow sense, of course it is absurd to seek for a cause of it beyond it. But if the term is taken as open to all comers, no difficulty arises. A term with similar properties is the term "Nature" – if we understand it rigidly, "miracles" are possible; but if we take it flexibly, the concept of something "supernatural" like that becomes at best merely conventional.

91 Of course, Nagarjuna would reject the proposition that God is eternal and at some time chose to create the world, since he does not admit of eternity.

difficult to accept philosophically (though some may consider it sacrilegious, as it implies that God either was diminished thereby or consented to transform part of His spirituality, if only a tiny speck of it, to the lower status of material substance).

> It should be pointed out here that 'creation' does not simply mean causality by God of (the rest of) the universe. The presumed type of causality involved is volition, a free act of will, rather than causation. Furthermore, God is not conceived as the direct cause of everything in the universe, but merely as First Cause and Prime Mover, i.e. as the cause of its initial contents and their initial movement, as well as of the 'laws of nature' governing them. This might be taken to mean, in a modern perspective, the core matter subject to the Big Bang, the ignition of that explosion and the programming of the evolution of nature thereafter, including appearance of elementary particles, atoms of increasing complexity, stars and planets, molecules, living cells, evolution of life forms, organisms with consciousness and will, and so

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forth (creationism need not be considered tied to a literal Biblical scenario).

Once God has willed (i.e. created) inchoate nature, it continues on its course in accordance with causation, with perhaps room for spontaneous events (as quantum mechanics suggests) and for localized acts of volition (by people, and perhaps higher animals, when they appear on the scene). As already mentioned, there are degrees of causation; and when something causes some second thing that in turn causes some third thing, it does not follow that the first thing is a cause of the third, and even in cases where it is (thus indirectly) a cause, the degree of causation involved may be diminished in comparison with the preceding link in the chain (dampening). Similarly with volition, the cause of a cause may be a lesser cause or not a cause at all. It is therefore inaccurate to regard a First Cause, such as God is conceived to be relative to nature, as being 'cause of everything' lumped together irrespective of process. The succession of causal events and the varieties of causal relations involved, have to be taken into consideration.

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Spontaneity of physical events and freedom of individual (human or animal) volition are not in logical conflict with creation, because they still occur in an existence context created by God. God may well be the indirect cause of spontaneous or individually willed events, in the sense of making them possible, without being their direct cause, in the sense of making them necessary or actualizing them. Furthermore, to affirm creation does not logically require that we regard, as did some Greek philosophers, God as thereafter *forced to* let Nature follow its set course unhindered. It is conceivable that He chooses not to interfere at all; but it is equally conceivable that He chooses to interfere punctually, occasionally changing the course of things (this would be what we call 'miracle', or more broadly 'providence'), or even at some future time arresting the world altogether. His being the world's initiator need not incapacitate Him thereafter from getting further involved.

All that I have just described is *conceivable*, i.e. a consistent theory of creation, but this does not mean

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> that it is definitely *proven*, i.e. deductively self-evident or inductively the only acceptable vision of things in the context of all available empirical data. Note well that I am not trying to give unconditional support to religious dogmas of any sort. Rather, I am reacting to the pretensions of many so-called scientists today, who (based on very simplistic ideas of causality and causal logic) claim that they have definitely *disproved* creation, or who like Nagarjuna claim that it is logically *not even thinkable*. Such dogmas are not genuine philosophy. One should never let oneself be intimidated by either priestly or academic prestige, but always remain open-minded and consider facts and arguments impartially and fairly.

Alternatively, Nagarjuna could be supposed to discuss in his second thesis *whether God was created by something else*. In that case, I would agree with his rejection of the idea. We could claim that God is uncreated, on the ground that we have conceived God as an explanation of the world appearing before us, and cannot go on looking for an explanation of the explanation and so on, *ad infinitum*. This position can

however be legitimately contested, on the ground that if we demand one explanation, consistency requires that we demand an infinite regression of them. So we are in a quandary, faced with either a lack of explanation or an overdose of explanations, neither of which is logically satisfying.

We might oppose an atheist conclusion by arguing that if we consider it acceptable to offer no explanation for the world, then we could equally well be allowed to offer none for God. However, there is a difference between these two positions, in that the world is empirically evident before us, whereas God is not[92]; furthermore, explanations are meant to simplify problems, whereas the assumption of God introduces new and more complex questions compared to the assumption of a world without God.

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92 The theory that God exists counts the existence of the world as empirical evidence for itself, since that is what the theory is constructed to explain. But this confirming evidence is *not exclusive* to that theory, since it is also claimed by contrary theories. This standoff could only be resolved, deductively, if some inextricable inconsistencies were found in all but one theory; or inductively, if some empirical detail were found which is explicable by one theory *and not by the others*.

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In conclusion, the ideas of God and creation are certainly full of difficulties, as Nagarjuna asserts (though for the wrong reasons), but altogether abandoning them also leaves us with difficulties, which Nagarjuna does not consider. The currently most rational position is probably an agnosticism leaning towards atheism. This does not preclude a personal leap of faith, based not on reason but on more emotional grounds – that is precisely what we mean by 'faith'[93]. It is interesting to note, concerning Buddhism, that "when someone asked Buddha the question whether the world was made by God, he did not answer"[94].

Cheng tells us that "the true Madhyamika approach" is "neither theistic nor atheistic", but merely that God "cannot be *conceived* of as existing". Nagarjuna does not really infer from the latter (though at times he seems to) that God does not exist, because "only a significant statement can be significantly negated or contradicted". Thus, even agnosticism is rejected by him, since it considers the issue

93 Even Buddhism calls on its adherents to have faith – faith enough to pursue enlightenment by meditation or whatever practices, till they get there and see its truth directly for themselves.

94 Cheng, p. 93.

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meaningful. Clearly, I am disagreeing, and maintaining that God is (somewhat) conceivable, but is neither provable nor disprovable; i.e. a reasonably intelligible and consistent theological theory can be formulated, but it remains speculative as we have no way to verify or falsify it.

(c) Other issues raised by Nagarjuna include the following:

- **He asks who in turn created God, and who in turn created that creator of the creator, ad infinitum?** This is of course a serious logical issue, legitimately raised. We have already addressed it, without claiming to have finally resolved it. The important counter-argument to note here is that atheism, too, leaves an unanswered question: how come existence exists?[95]
- **Nagarjuna asks in what place God was staying when he created the world, and in what place he put the world he created, and whether he or another created those places; and he claims that such considerations give rise to infinite regress of creations and creators.** This query is also legitimate, but more easily opposed. One might hypothesize that God takes up no space and

95 See Appendix 1: fallacy I.

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created space as well as its contents. One might add the more modern view, that space is not independent of matter, nor 'occupied' by it, but a relation between material items. It is also interesting to note that modern physics postulates certain basic constituents of matter as without spatial extension.

- **He asks why, if God (as we conceive Him) is omnipotent and omniscient, and so unhindered by obstacles, He did not create the world "in its totality at one and the same time".** To me this question does not seem very unsettling – we can just answer, why not? I mean, if God had done so, Nagarjuna would be asking: why not create a world of process?[96]
- He should rather have asked why, if God (as we conceive Him) is complete and self-sufficient, and so lacking nothing and so desiring nothing, He created the world at all. What might possibly have been His motive? That is a $64,000 question, for which no answer is forthcoming from anyone! **Nagarjuna perhaps senses this question, when he argues that "God wanted to create all**

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[96] See Appendix 1: fallacy I.

creatures" implies antecedent "causal conditions", i.e. that "all things were produced from *karma*". But it must be pointed out that if creation is an act of volition, it might well be without motive, and even if it has a motive such motive would be an influence but not a deterministic cause. There is no inconsistency in regarding free will as occasionally motiveless, or when motivated as unforced by its motives. That is precisely what distinguishes volition from mechanical action: it remains free and the responsibility of the Agent irrespective of all surrounding circumstances.

- **Nagarjuna also brings up "the problem of evil" (what we today call theodicy, i.e. the justice of God): if God (as we conceive Him) is omnipotent, omniscient and infinitely good, just and compassionate, why does He let "moral evil and physical suffering" exist in the world? "Evil men enjoy happiness and… good men suffer" and yet God will not or cannot prevent it. "If God cannot prevent evil he is not omnipotent, and if he can but will not, he is not all good." Thus, at least two of the attributes we assign to Him, omnipotence and perfect goodness, are mutually contradictory, given**

that "obviously, there is evil in the world" (and being omniscient, He must be aware of it). Therefore, God is either "not omnipotent" or "not all good" (or both), which in either case would mean a lack of the attributes we conceive him as having to have to be God, so that "he is not God" and "God cannot be conceived to exist".

This is of course a big issue for theists to face, and Nagarjuna's reasoning here is generally valid. However, the problem is not logically insurmountable and Nagarjuna's conclusion is too quick and radical. For we can suppose that God has a more complex accounting process in mind (regarding reward and punishment, tit for tat), or that He has instituted a system of trials for our ultimate greater good. What we view as inexcusable suffering of innocents, may in God's view not be as serious as we think, because (as Buddhism itself ultimately suggests) suffering is superficial and illusory. We may even have volunteered to be born into this world of apparently unjust suffering, to fulfill some purpose for God. And so forth – the concepts involved are logically

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too vague and uncertain to allow us to draw a definite conclusion.

Before leaving this topic, I would like to make some comments regarding Buddhism in general. At its core, the Buddhist doctrine is not theistic, in the sense of believing in a creator, nor particularly anti-theistic, though effectively atheistic. However, having arisen in Indian culture, it adopted ideas of gods, in the sense of supermen or supernatural beings, who were however themselves still ultimately subject to the Four Noble Truths, i.e. though they were very high-minded and heavenly, due to their good karma, they too eventually had to find liberation from the karmic cycle or face a lesser rebirth. At a later stage, as Cheng says, "the Buddha was deified", not in the sense of being regarded as creator, but in the sense of having the other "main admirable characteristics of God or divine being" that we have listed above. Initially a saintly man, he was promoted by his disciples to the highest rank of godliness, above all the other gods just described, because no longer subject to ignorance and karma. He had, as it were, dissolved in the universal unity (reality, *nirvana*) underlying the world of multiplicity

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(illusion, *samsara*), and thus merged with what might be called God.

Another aspect to be mentioned is that of *idolatry*, i.e. the worship of statues representing gods. This practice was present in Indian culture when Buddhism arose, and in other Asian cultures when Buddhism later reached them. Buddhists soon adopted this practice too, making and worshipping statues of the Buddha, and later other presumed Buddhas, boddhisattvas and arhats (saints). For at least some Buddhist sects, prayer and offerings to such statues seems to be the main religious activity. It is very surprising that Buddhism did not from its inception firmly discard such polytheism and idol worship. One would have thought, considering the otherwise 'scientific' mindedness of core Buddhist doctrine, that it would have sharply criticized and inhibited such irrelevant and dubious tendencies. No doubt, the initial motive was tolerance, taking potential converts as they were and avoiding conflict; but this attitude effectively perpetuated primitive habits.[97]

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[97] I have never seen idolatry even questioned in any Buddhist text, ancient or modern! But anyway my historical analysis is confirmed in Christmas Humphreys' *Buddhism* (Harmondsworth,

But it ought to be emphasized that the worship of carvings of Buddhas is *in direct logical contradiction* with the 'nothing has a self' doctrine of Buddhism, since it involves *a mental projection of selfhood into statues*. The fact is that, *in the idol worshipper's mind*, the figure he calls to and bows to is somehow a part of or an emanation of or a conduit to the transcendent deity, and so possessed of a (derivative) 'soul'. Thus, idolatry *perpetuates* one of the main psychological errors of people, according to Buddhism. If it is ignorance to assign soul to a living being, which at least seems to have consciousness, emotion and volition, how much more foolish it is to assign it to stone (or paper or even, finally, mental) images! Ordinary Buddhists surely cannot hope to attain the

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Mx.: Penguin, 1955. Rev. ed.). He states: "As it gently flowed into country after country… [Buddhism] tended to adopt, or failed to contest the rival claims of, the indigenous beliefs, however crude. In this way the most divers and debased beliefs were added to the corpus of 'Buddhism', and embarrass the student to-day" (p. 12). Later, he writes: "Certainly within a hundred years of the death of Asoka… from a human being the Buddha had become a super-human being, and his spiritual Essence had entered a pantheon nearly as large as that of the Hinduism from which it largely derived" (pp. 48-49).

ideal of Buddhism by such practices, which have exactly the opposite educational effect.

All this to say that, whereas the core Buddhist doctrine is not especially concerned with theological ideas or issues, but with promoting wise and loving attitudes and behavior patterns, tending to enlightenment and liberation, Buddhism in practice is, for most of its adherents still today, a theism of sorts.

It should moreover be stressed that the attack on Creation is a distraction. The main underlying problem of the beginning of things remains, even for non-theists. Physicists have to face it, and so do Buddhists. In the latter context, in the beginning is the "original ground" of Nirvana. Its nature and essence is stillness, quietness, peace, perfection and fulfillment. All of a sudden, it stirs and subdivides; then more and more, till it engages in a frenzy of motion and distinctions. Samsara is born and proceeds. Since then, according to Buddhism, existence is suffering; and the meaning of all our lives is to intentionally return to the original mind state, by means of meditation and good deeds. So, what caused this madness? Was the original ground unstable or dissatisfied? Was it an

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incomprehensible "spontaneous" event or was it a stupid "act of will"? Buddhism does not really explain.

Very similar notions are found in Judaism. Note first the ambivalence about Creation, which is presumed by Rabbinical commentators to be an 'act of love' by God for his creatures (on the principle that whatever God does has to be good), but at the same time is admitted as an act that gave rise (at least since the Garden of Eden incident) to empirically evident "evil" in the world. In particular, while procreation is prescribed so as to perpetuate life, the sex act is viewed as involving the "evil impulse". Note also the Jew's duty to work his/her way, through study, prayer and other good deeds (*mitzvoth*), towards – according to kabalistic interpretations – a renewed fusion with God (*teshuvah*). If we draw an analogy between the Jewish idea of God (one, unique, universal, infinite) and the less personalized Buddhist idea of Nirvana, we see the equivalence between the questions "why did God create the world?" and "why did Nirvana degenerate into Samsara?"

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11. Self or soul.

Nagarjuna, together with other Buddhists, denies the existence of a real "self" in man[98], i.e. that the "I" of each person is a soul or spiritual entity distinct from his physical body. This concept, referred to as the "*atman*", was regarded in Indian (Hindu) tradition as "the feeler of sensations, thinker of thoughts, and receiver of rewards and punishments for actions good and bad", something that "persists through physical changes, exists before birth and after death, and remains from one life to the other", something "constant and eternal" and "self-subsistent", which was ultimately "ontologically identical with *Brahman*, the essential reality underlying the universe" (i.e. God). The atman, or at least the ultimate Brahman essence of every atman, was considered as the most "real" of existents, because unlike the transient phenomena of experience, it was "permanent, unchanging and independent."

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98 For this topic, see Cheng, pp. 74-76. He there refers to MT IX, XVIII:1a,1b,6, XXVII:4-8, and to HT II.

(a) Nagarjuna attacks this view, arguing that if to be "real" means to be "permanent, unchanging and independent", then the phenomena apparent to us would have to be regarded as "illusions", since they are transient, changing and dependent. It would follow that transience, change and dependence – being only manifested by phenomena – are also not "real". To Nagarjuna this seems "absurd", because "moral disciplines would lose their significance and spiritual effort would be in vain."

(b) Furthermore, he asks whether or not "changing phenomena", i.e. "our bodies or physical appearances", are "characteristics of the *atman*", and if so, what the relation between the atman and its characteristics might be, are they "identical" or "different"? If they were "identical", then atman would be subject to birth and death (and so forth) like the body, in contradiction to the definition of atman. If they are "different", then the atman "would be perceived without characteristics", which "it is not", because "nothing can be perceived without characteristics". On the other hand, if the atman is

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"without any characteristic", it would be "in principle, indefinable and hence inconceivable".

(c) Moreover, to the argument that "although the atman differs from the characteristics and cannot be perceived directly, its existence can be inferred", Nagarjuna replies that "inference and analogy are inapplicable in the case of knowing the *atman*" because they are only "applicable among directly perceivable phenomena". He therefore considers that "it is unintelligible to say that *atman* exists behind changing appearances."

Nagarjuna thus comes to the conclusion that "nothing has selfhood" and "*atman* is empty". This does not constitute a rejection on his part of a "conventional" idea of the self, as a mere "collection of different states or characteristics" such that "the self and characteristics are mutually dependent". This artificial construct of a self, being entirely identified with the perceivable phenomena we attribute to it, is not "permanent, unchanging and independent". Allow me now to debate the issues.

Let us start with **argument 11(a)**. I would agree with Nagarjuna here, that reality and illusion should not be defined

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as his predecessors do with reference to eternity, constancy and causal independence or their negations. As explained earlier, "reality" and "illusion" are epistemological judgments applied to "appearances". These two concepts arise first in relation to phenomena. Phenomena (perceived things) are considered, in practice and in theory, to be *prima facie* "real", and then demoted to the temporary status of "problematic" if contradictions are apparent between two of them, until either or both of these phenomena is/are dumped into the category of "illusion", on either deductive or inductive grounds. There is no concept of "reality" or "illusion" apart from appearance; they merely refer to subcategories of appearances.

At a later stage, these concepts are enlarged from perceptual appearances to conceptual and intuitive appearances. Both the latter appearances similarly have, as soon as and however vaguely they are conceived or intuited, an initial credibility, which we call the status of reality. But being less evident, more hypothetical, their effective status is closer to problematic, and they have to be immediately and repeatedly thereafter further defined, and tested for internal consistency, for consistency with empirical data, and by comparison to

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alternative theses. The answers to these questions determine the degree of probability we assign to concepts or intuitions. Eventually, if they are found contrary to experience, or inconsistent with themselves or a larger conceptual context, or less credible than their alternatives, they are relegated to the status of the illusory.

For us, then, all appearances are *equally* 'real' in the primary sense that it is a fact that they exist and are objects of consciousness[99]. Moreover, as earlier explained, with reference to inductive and deductive issues, pure percepts (concrete appearances, phenomena) are always 'real'; but concepts (abstract appearances), including the conceptual admixtures in percepts, may be regarded as *to various degrees* 'real' (or inversely, 'illusory').

This analysis of reality and illusion as ontological qualifications based on epistemological considerations, shows that there is no basis for Hindu philosophy's identification of them with eternity, constancy and causal independence or their negations. The latter seems to be a poetic drift, an expression of devotion to God: the presumed

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[99] Some might say, exist *as* objects of consciousness – but even that is existence.

common ground of all selves is hailed as the only "real" thing, in contrast to which everything else is mere "illusion". "Real" in that context means significant to the world, worthy of attention and pursuit – it is a value judgment of another sort.

If we look to the epistemological status of *the concept of* God, we would say that it is conceivable to some degree; but not to an extreme degree, because there are considerable vagueness and uncertainty in it (see the previous topic of the present essay). An appeal to *revelation* is not a solution, because revelations to prophets are for the rest of us mere hearsay; and anyway different prophets have conflicting visions, so that even if we grant that they had the visions, we have to regard some (and therefore possibly all) of them as having misinterpreted their respective visions. Faith is always involved and required with reference to God. But even supposing God is admitted to exist, and that He is one[100],

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100 This characteristic of God, one-ness, is not mentioned by Cheng, but philosophical Brahmanism is ultimately monotheistic, even though many Hindus are in practice polytheistic. It should be mentioned, however, that one-ness is not logically implied by eternity, invariance and independence; i.e. one could conceive two or more entities with these characteristics (certainly the first two, at

eternal, invariant and completely independent, it does not follow that this is a definition of reality. The universe, which evidently exists, is also still real, even if it is but a figment of God's imagination, even if it and all its constituents are transient, changing and dependent. A short-lived event may still be real; a flux may still have continuity, a caused event may still have occurred.

Thus, we may confidently agree with Nagarjuna's rejection of the Hindu definition of reality. We may, nevertheless, doubt *his argument* in favor of that rejection, namely that "no evil person could be transformed" if the phenomenal world were illusory in the Hindu sense. Even agreeing with him that people can morally improve, we have to consider that concepts of morality, or of good and evil, come much later in the development of knowledge than the concepts of reality and illusion, and so cannot logically be used to define or justify them. Furthermore, concepts of morality depend for their meaning on an assumption of volition operating in a world subject to time, change and causality; morality has no

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least – independence would be open to debate). Perhaps Zoroastrianism is a case in point?

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meaning in a world with only determinism or chance, or in a static multiplicity or unity.

Let us move on to **argument 11(b)**. The question asked here is what the relation between a soul and "its" body and other perceivable phenomena (such as imaginations and emotions) might be. In my view, and I think the view of many ordinary people and philosophers, the soul is a spiritual entity (i.e. one of some stuff other than that of the material body or of mental projections), who is at once the Subject of consciousness (i.e. the one who is cognizing phenomena and other appearances – i.e. the "feeler of sensations and thinker of thoughts" mentioned above) and the Agent of volition (i.e. the one who evaluates, who makes choices and decisions, who puts in motion acts of will, who has attitudes and tendencies, and who is within certain parameters free of determinism, though not unaffected by influences and motives – i.e. the "receiver of rewards and punishments for actions good and bad" mentioned above).

Thus, the relation of soul to other existents within the universe, according to this view, is that the soul is capable (as Subject) of cognizing to some extent concrete and abstract appearances, and (as Agent) of interfering to some extent in

the course of natural events, influenced and motivated by them through his cognition of them, but still free to impose his will on some of them. To affirm powers of cognition and will to the soul does not, note well, imply such powers to be unlimited or invariable; one may be free to act within certain parameters and these parameters may under various circumstances widen or narrow in scope. By ‘influence’, I mean that the events external to the soul may *facilitate* or *make more difficult* its actions, to degrees below 100% (such extreme degree being the limiting case of deterministic causality, i.e. causation). This view leaves open the issue as to whether the soul is of limited duration (i.e. bounded by the lifetime of the body, which it would be if it is an epiphenomenon of matter clustered in living cells and the complex organisms they compose), or eternal (which it would be if it is a spark of God).

Returning now to Nagarjuna’s argument, we would say that soul is not “identical” with its perceptible “characteristics”. The soul may inhabit or be an epiphenomenon of the body, but is in either case something other than the body. The soul perceives and conceives the body (including visceral sentiments) and matter beyond it and mental phenomena

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within it (i.e. imaginations), through sensory and brain processes, but these processes are not identical with its cognition of their results. The soul acts on the body (or at least, the brain), and through it on the matter beyond it and on the projection of mental images, but this action (that we call will, a power of spirit over matter[101]) is a special sort of causality neither the same as mechanical causation nor mere happenstance. The "characteristics" of the soul are thus merely perceptible *manifestations* (sensations, movements, emotions) of deeper events (consciousness, will) occurring *at the interface of* matter and spirit and more deeply still *within* spirit.

This theory of the soul differs from the Indian, in that it does not imply that the soul is imperishable or that it does not undergo internal changes or that it is entirely causally independent. Nor does it imply that the soul is separable (though distinguishable) from the body, existing before or after or without its biological activity, in the way of a

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101 Granting the universality of law of conservation of energy, we would have to presume that spirit's will somehow releases energy locked in matter, rather than inputting new energy into it. Perhaps volition affects the wave-form of energy without affecting its magnitude.

disembodied ghost. So Nagarjuna's criticism that birth and death are contradictory to a concept of soul is irrelevant to this theory; for his criticism only applies to the specific Indian definition of "atman". But even if the soul is granted to be eternal, I do not think Nagarjuna's criticism is valid; for even an eternal spiritual entity may conceivably have momentary effects – as in the case of God, as we conceive Him, creating or interfering in the world. Note that we commonly regard the human soul, too, as acting on (the rest of) the natural world, without considering it necessarily eternal.

With regard to the second alternative of Nagarjuna's argument, considering the possibility that soul be "different" from its perceivable "characteristics", our reply would be, not only that they are distinct (though related as cause and effect, remember), but that we need not accept his claim that the soul's imperceptibility implies it to be "inconceivable" and "indefinable". We agree that the soul cannot be perceived, i.e. does not itself display perceptible qualities, i.e. is not a phenomenon with sense-modalities like shape and color, sound, smell, taste or touch aspects. But we may nevertheless to a considerable extent conceive and define it. The proof is

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that we have just done so, above; furthermore, if Nagarjuna did not have a concept and definition, however vague and open to doubt, of soul to work with, he would have been unable to discuss the issue at all. There is no epistemological principle that the imperceptible is inconceivable and indefinable; if there were, no concept or definition would be admissible, not even those that Nagarjuna himself uses, not even those involved in the statement of that alleged principle. Concepts are precisely tools for going beyond perception. Complex concepts are not mere summaries of percepts, but imaginative departures from and additions to perceptual knowledge, nevertheless bound to the latter by logical and adductive rules. Even simple concepts, purporting to be summaries, are in fact regulated by these same rules.

Which brings us to **argument 11(c)**. Here, Nagarjuna contends that inferences and analogies from experience may be valid in specific cases, but not in the case of soul. He claims that we can for example infer fire indirectly from smoke, because we have previously seen fire directly in conjunction with smoke, whereas in the case of soul, we have never perceived it so we cannot infer it from perceptible "characteristics". We can reply that, though fire and smoke

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provide a valid example of inference, this is a selective example. Many other examples can be brought to bear, where we infer something never perceived from something perceived. For example, no one has ever directly sensed a magnetic 'field of force', but if you hold two magnets opposite each other, you feel the pull or push between them; you can also see a nail moving while a magnet is held close to it without touching it. The concept of force or field is constructed in relation to an experience, but is not itself an object of experience.

Nagarjuna's discourse is itself replete with such 'indirect' concepts. For instance, consciousness is imperceptible, perception is imperceptible, and so on. One of his favorites, namely "emptiness", is *per se* without perceptible qualities. So he is using a double standard when he denies such concepts, in support of his denial that soul is intelligible. Such concepts are constructed by imaginative analogy (e.g. I may draw a magnetic force as a line or arrow) and by verbal definitions and descriptions (using words referring to relations first conceived with reference to empirical events – for instance, "whatever *causes* this motion, call it a force" or "force equals mass times acceleration caused"). Such creative

construction is merely a first stage; it does not in itself validate a concept. The proposed concept must thereafter be tested and tested again, with reference to the totality of other empirical knowledge and theory, before it can be considered as valid. Its validity is also a function of its utility, i.e. the extent to which it helps us to better understand and order our experience of the world.

I personally do not regard that the concept of soul can be entirely based on such construction from experience. It seems evident to me that consciousness implies someone who is being conscious, a Subject-soul, as well as something one is conscious of, an Object. But I am sensitive to the objections by many philosophers, including Buddhist ones, that this thought may just be a prejudice incited by grammatical habit. And, as already admitted, if one introspects and looks for phenomenal manifestations of a self being aware, one finds none. Some, including Nagarjuna, would say that the concept of consciousness is itself in doubt, that all one can empirically claim is appearance. As for the concept of volition, let alone that of soul as the Agent of will, many doubt or deny it, in view of the difficulties in its definition and proof.

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But I think it is very important to realize that all Buddhist accounts (at least all those I have encountered) of ***how an illusion of selfhood might conceivably be constructed by a non-person*** fail to avoid begging the question. A theory is required, which answers all possible questions, before such a revolutionary idea as that of denial of *real* self in man can be posited with confidence; and no theory without holes or inconsistencies has to my knowledge been proposed. We may readily admit the existence of an *illusory* self (or 'ego'), constructed and suffered by a stupid or misguided real self. But an aberration or delusion with no one constructing it or subject to it, seems like an absurd concept to me. It implies mere happenstance, determinism, without any consciousness, volition, values or responsibility.

Indeed, if you examine attempted such theories they always (overtly or covertly) describe an effective person (the pronoun 'he') constructing a false self. They never manage to escape from the sentence structure with a personal subject; typically: 'he gradually deludes himself into thinking he has a self'. They do not provide a credibly detailed and consistent scenario of how unconscious and impersonal elements and processes (Nagarjuna's "characteristics") could possibly

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aggregate into something that has the impression (however false) it is someone! A machine (or robot with artificial intelligence) may 'detect' things (for us) but it has no consciousness; it may 'do' things (for us) but it has no volition; it may loudly proclaim 'I' but it has no soul.

There is also to consider the reverse process of *de*construction, how an ultimately impersonal artificial self (non-self) would or could go about freeing itself from illusion. Why would a non-self have any problem with remaining deluded (assuming it could be), and how if it has no personal powers would it intelligently choose to put in motion the prescribed process of liberation from delusion. A simple sentence like 'to realize you have no self, make an effort to meditate daily' is already a contradiction in terms, in my view.

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12. Self-knowledge.

Let us therefore consider how we might argue in favor of a soul, consisting of a Subject and his consciousness and an Agent and his will. If I do not mention feelings much here, it is only because I consider them derivatives of the other two powers of the soul; but the soul as author of evaluations (value-judgments, choices, affections) is intended here too.

As already stated, I agree that the soul has *in itself* no perceptible (i.e. visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory or tactile) qualities, comparable to those in or around the 'body' (matter) or in mental projections (imaginations, dreams). This can be taken to simply mean that it is not made of material or mental substance, granting that "matter" (in a large sense, here, including physical and imaginary concrete phenomena) is whatever has these qualities; for this reason, let us say that soul is made of some distinctive substance, call it spirit.[102] All we have done here is hypothesized, by analogy to the

[102] We can leave as an open issue, parenthetically, the possibility that matter and spirit are respectively coarse and fine manifestations of one and the same substance.

phenomenal realm, an entity (soul) of different stuff (spirit); this is logically legitimate, provided we go on and justify it further.

This concept of a soul is constructed to explain certain phenomena, on the basis of a mass of observations and theory-building. The soul is posited as the Subject of consciousness (or cognition) of, first, concrete phenomena (percepts) and, second, abstract appearances (concepts); and at a later stage as the Agent of will, the presumed *cause* (in a special sense) of certain perceptible actions of bodily organs (eye movements, speech, motions of arms and legs, and so on) as well as of intellectual organs (imagination, attention, thought processes, and so on). But if soul is reduced to such a conceptual construct, we only succeed at best in giving a *general* description of its powers and activities.

Such a theoretical approach leaves us without justification for our day-to-day propositions concerning *our own particular* thoughts and deeds at any given time. For conception cannot proceed from a single event; it is the outcome of *comparisons and contrasts* between two or more events. Whereas, statements about an individual person's present situation are not made in comparison and contrast to other persons or

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situations. A general proposition can serve as major premise of a syllogism, but to obtain a particular conclusion, we need a particular minor premise. Indeed, to obtain the general proposition in the first place, we need to admit some particular cases of the same kind, which we can then generalize and apply to other particular cases (that is what syllogistic inference is all about).

That is, when we say, for instances, "I believe so and so" or "I choose so and so" or "I wish so and so", we are evidently not referring to phenomena *perceptible at the moment* (belief, choice, wishing have no immediate concrete manifestations, though they may eventually have perceptible effects), and we are evidently not *conceptually inferring* such propositions from any perceptual phenomena (i.e. what these propositions refer to are not abstract appearances). Yet these propositions are significant to each of us, and can fairly be declared true or false by us. Their truth or falsehood is, to repeat, not exclusively based on experience and on rational considerations, as Buddhists suggest, but is *immediately, directly known* by introspection.

This is what I would call 'self-knowledge'; and since this type of cognition is neither perception nor conception, it

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deserves a special name – say, 'intuition'. My use of this term should not be taken to imply acceptance of knowledge of other people's souls, thoughts, wills or emotions (which is another issue, open to debate, solipsism not being excluded) – it is here restricted to self-intuition. I do not use the term 'introspection', because this may be used with reference to perceptible phenomena, such as one's mental imaginations or bodily feelings.

Thus, in this view, the soul is cognized by three types of cognition: directly by intuition, and indirectly by conceptualization based on the soul's perceptual effects *and* its intuited states and activities. Of course, 'cognition' is one and the same in all three cases; only *the object* of cognition differs in each case. If we limit our consideration only to perceptual effects and concepts derived from them, we can only construct a *theoretical* 'soul' and refer to '*powers*' of soul. To obtain and claim knowledge of an *individual* soul and of its *actual* perceptions, conceptions, beliefs, intentions, acts of will, value-judgments, affections, etc., we have to admit a direct cognition other than perception, namely 'intuition'.

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Thus, we could refer to soul with several terms: the 'I' of my own intuitions, the 'self' when assuming that others have an 'I' like mine (on the basis of similar perceptible effects), and the 'soul' when referring to the conceptual construct based on my 'I', your 'I' and their perceptually evident (presumed) effects. Granting all this, it is no wonder that if we seek definition or proof of the 'I' in phenomenal effects, we will not find it!

Let us now return to these intuited propositions, for a moment. Consider this well. If I say to you "I believe (or disbelieve or am unsure about) so and so" – did I infer this from anything and can you deny me? Sure, I have to mean what I say to you, be sincere. Sometimes, too, I may *lie to myself*, and claim to believe something (e.g. some complimentary claim about myself, or some religious or political claim), when in fact I do not really believe it. The human psyche has its complexities, and we can hide and not admit things even to oneself. In such cases, the truth of the statement can be verified with reference to a larger context, checking if my feelings and actions are consistent with my claimed belief. But this does not mean that all such personal claims are known by reference to perceptible side-effects, as

Buddhists claim. It only means that, just as in the perceptual and conceptual fields, appearances have an initial credibility but have to be faced off with other appearances, so in the field of intuition, an inductive process of verification goes on, through which some intuitions are found to be doubtful (due to their conflicts with other intuitions, and/or perceptible phenomena and conceptual considerations).

Furthermore, it should be stressed that not all statements of the form "I-verb-object" (object being optional) are based on intuition alone. Some have perceptual and/or conceptual basis only, or also. For example, "I am thinking that we should go there" involves perceptual factors, perhaps a mental image of our bodies (mine and yours) walking along in some direction, as well as conceptual factors, perhaps a reasoning process as to why we should go there. But some such statements are purely intuitive, e.g. "I believe so and so" is final and independent, whatever the reasoning that led up to the belief. Furthermore, such statements need not be verbalized. The words "I", "believe" etc. involved in the statement are of course products of conceptualization; but the intent of the sentence as a whole is a particular intuition, which the words verbalize.

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Also to note well is that a proposition like "I believe so and so" cannot be based on a coded message from the brain, to the effect that "so and so should be declared as 'your belief' at this time", for the simple reason that we have no awareness of any *perceptible* message of this sort. Therefore, such a statement is not a translation in words of a special kind of percept (just as conceptual statements are not). Perhaps the statement "I believe so and so" *itself* is the perceptible message from the brain? If so, we would be justified in denying any intuition of soul and its states and activities. But it is evident from introspection that we know what we want to say before we put it in words. The words merely verbalize an object already cognized; and this cognition must be 'intuition', since it is neither perception (having no perceptible qualities) nor conception (since it is particular).

It seems justified, in conclusion, to hypothesize, in addition to perception and conception, a third source of knowledge, called intuition, a direct cognition whose objects are the self (I) and its actual cognitions (I *know* what I am seeing, hearing, imagining, thinking, etc., right now), volitions (I *know* what I choose, decide, want, intend, will, etc., at this moment) and affections (I *know* what I like or dislike or am

indifferent to, what I hope or fear, etc., at this time). I *know* these most intimate of things – who can tell me otherwise, how would they know better than me what the imperceptible contents of my consciousness are? Soul and its presumed powers – cognition, volition, affection – cannot be conceived by comparison, since I do not see any souls other than my own; it can only be conceived by inference from perceptible and intuitive phenomena that we hypothesize to be its effects. The objects of intuition may be "empty" of perceptible qualities; but they may still have an existence of sorts, just as abstracts are not themselves perceptible but may credibly be affirmed.

Suppose, for example, I meditate, watching my breath; my random thoughts cause my attention to stray for awhile[103]; I drag my attention back to the object of my meditation, my breath. Here, *the direction and intensity of my attention* require an act of will. The straying away of attention from the breath is *not* my will; *my* will is what makes it return to the

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103 As we meditate, countless thoughts pop up, tempting us to follow them. Eventually, one manages to hook us, grabbing our interest and hurtling us through a series of associations. Thus totally absorbed, we forget our object of meditation for a while, until we realize we have been distracted.

breath. Phenomenally, the attention on the breath and the loss of this attention (or rather the breath phenomenon and the lack of it) are on an equal plane. What allows me to regard the one as mine and the other as not mine, is the awareness that I had to make *an effort* in the one case and that no effort[104] was involved in the other case. This 'effort' is the intuited volition and that it is 'mine' signals intuition of soul. I may focus on the effort alone, or by an additional act of will focus on the fact that it is mine. There is no 'reflexive act' involved in this self-consciousness, because it is one part of me watched by the rest of me.

Of course, this is all very mysterious. When we say "I think this" or "I will that", we have no idea where this or that event came from or how it popped up. Certainly the deep source and manufacture of a thought or will of the soul is unknown to us, so we cannot claim to wholly own it. We do not have a plan of action before the thought or will, through which we consciously construct the latter. Each thought or will, finally, just is. There are no steps or stages, we just do it. But it is still not just happenstance; there is an author, ourselves. We are

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[104] The thoughts I strayed into may have involved voluntary processes, but my straying into them was involuntary.

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able to distinguish, in most cases, between thoughts or wills that just 'happen to us', and others that 'we author'; we may even identify them as voluntary or involuntary to various degrees.

All this to say that Nagarjuna's critique of soul and its powers, and of the knowability of these things, is far from conclusive. Buddhists are justified in doubting and inquiring into the issues, but from a purely philosophical point of view the Madhyamika conclusion of "emptiness" may be considered too radical and extreme. It may be obviously valid from the perspective of someone who has reached some higher form of consciousness (which, *I know, I* have not), but their *rational* arguments are not decisive. Most important, as we have seen, Nagarjuna bases his denial on *one particular* theory of soul (the atman theory), and has not considered all conceivable theories. To rebut (or more precisely, to put in doubt) his arguments, it is therefore sufficient to propose one alternative theory (as above done) that he has ignored; the alternative does not need to be proved – if it is just conceivable (coherent, consistent), that is enough.

Nagarjuna does not, in my view, satisfactorily answer questions like 'who is it that perceives, thinks, desires or

acts?', 'who is it that meditates in pursuit of liberation or eventually reaches it?', when he explains away the soul as a mere cluster of percepts or concepts, as something (illegitimately) inferred from perceptible phenomena by a presumed cause-effect relation.

In passing, it is worth noting that, although the doctrine of no-self is fundamental to Buddhism, not all Buddhists have interpreted it as a total rejection of soul (in some sense of the term). One Theravada school, known as the 'Personalists', dating back to about 300 BCE, whose adepts in the 7th century CE included almost one third of all Buddhist monks in India, "motivated by commonsense, maintained that in addition to impersonal events, there is still a 'person' to be reckoned with."[105] According to the *Abhidharmakosha*, a Mahayana work by Vasubhandu (4th century CE), the Personalists interpreted the no-self doctrine of the Buddha as signifying simply that "something which is not the true Self is mistaken for the true Self".

It is thus possible to understand the doctrine of not-self as a rejection, not of 'soul' ('real or deep self'), but rather of 'ego'

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105 According to Edward Conze, in *Buddhist Scriptures* (Penguin: England, 1959). See pp. 190 and 192-7.

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(‘conventional or superficial self’). The ego is a confused construct of ‘selfhood’ by the soul, due to the latter’s *self-identification with* delusive opinions (acquired by itself and through social influences), and consequently with certain attitudes and actions it engages in, in the way of a self-protective reaction. By predefining itself and its world, the soul imprisons itself in patterns of response appropriate to that definition. It is up to the soul to rid itself of the ego-centered viewpoint, by realizing the stupidity and avoidability of it.

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Not 'empty logic', but empty *of* logic.

I shall stop here, save for some concluding remarks, though a lot more could be said. As we have seen, Nagarjuna is motivated by very good intentions: he wishes to help us achieve enlightenment or liberation, by freeing us from all obstacles to cognition of the "emptiness" underlying the phenomenal and conceptual world. For him, the principal obstacle is Reason: as he says, "if conceptualizations are permitted there will arise many, as well as great, errors"[106]. His strategy is therefore to invalidate for us our every logical tool.

From a *practical* point of view, we might well agree with and congratulate Nagarjuna. When one is engaged in meditation, it is appropriate to stop all thought, or at least to dissociate oneself from all imaginative and rational processes till they stop by themselves. One may also make one's whole life a meditative process, and legitimately choose to altogether

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106 Cheng, p. 37 – quoting MT XVII:12a.

abstain from rumination and cogitation. There is no doubt in my mind that in such context thought is useless, and indeed a hindrance to progress, apart perhaps from some initial theoretical studies and reflections to put oneself on the right track, as well as a minimum of ongoing thought to deal with routine aspects of survival.

But that is not what is at issue, here. Our concern in this paper is with Nagarjuna's *theoretical* discourse, his philosophical theses and claims to 'logic'. We may well doubt these, in view of the underhanded means he is willing to use to achieve his ends, including ignoring, eclipsing or distorting relevant facts, diverting attention from controversies or lying outright, begging the questions (circular arguments), stealing concepts (using them even while undercutting them), contradicting himself, manipulating readers in every which way. However noble his motives may be, they cannot justify such methods of discourse.

One may legitimately ask whether Nagarjuna's "Middle Way" corresponds to the Buddha's original concept with the same name. The Buddha's teaching is a practical one, eschewing the behavioral extremes, the fanaticism and

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asceticism, that religious desperation and enthusiasm tend to generate. Nagarjuna's is not a teaching of equal moderation in theoretical issues, but an extremist position, one I would characterize as nihilistic. This has been made evident again and again in the above exposition.

When I picked up the book *Empty Logic*, earlier this year in Bangkok's Khaosan Road, I was eager to learn more about Buddhism, and in particular about Nagarjuna and his Madhyamika school (having read many positive appraisals of them in other books, and some quotations). As a logician, I was especially pleased at the prospect that there might be a 'logic of emptiness', perhaps forms of reasoning still undiscovered in the West. Unfortunately, thanks to Cheng's very competent presentation, I soon discovered that Nagarjuna work contains no new field of logic, but is basically empty of logic, a ferocious mauling of logic. What a disappointment!

Please note well that I have nowhere tried to deny[107] Buddhism's thesis that ultimate reality cannot be accessed

107 To reject arguments offered in favor of a conclusion does not imply rejection of the conclusion concerned, since it might be reached by other arguments.

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through rational means, but only through some fundamental change of cognitive paradigm. I nowhere claim to know what "emptiness" *is*, only what it *is not*. I remain open to such an idea, though I cannot claim to have achieved such deep levels of meditation that I can confirm it firsthand. I expected Nagarjuna to help me break through to such higher knowledge, not by attempting to destroy my lower knowledge but by proposing some evolutionary process.

Just as conceptual knowledge complements and improves on perceptual knowledge, without dismissing all perception, so may we expect meditative knowledge to correct the errors of and enlarge what came before it, without ignoring and belying all conception. I would not resist a fundamental rejection of logic, if some convincing means were used to this end; it is not attachment which prevents me. The way offered by Nagarjuna is unconvincing to anyone with high standards of knowledge; it is merely a malicious parody of logic. What revolts me here is the shameless sophistry engaged in by Nagarjuna, in his impossible attempts to give logical legitimacy to his anti-logical ideas. (See **Appendix 1** for a list of fallacies he uses repeatedly.)

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If someone sincerely believes that no words have true significance, would he write his skeptical words and expect others to understand them? If someone thinks or writes about motion, even to deny it, is he not thereby engaging in motion? If someone writes about causality, denying it so as to convince others to give up the idea, surely it shows that he himself believes in causality, in his ability to influence others and in their ability to choose a different cognitive path. Read his lips – if he did not believe in these things, why would he bother writing about anything? Like many Western skeptics, Nagarjuna does not take the trouble to harmonize his words and deeds, testing his thoughts on his own thinking; if knowingly indulged, this is hypocrisy. Like many religious apologists, Nagarjuna considers logic, not as a tool of research and discovery, but as a weapon of rhetoric in defense of preconceived ideas; if knowingly indulged, this is cheating.

It is legitimate to draw conclusions about someone on the basis of his arguments; this is not to be confused with *ad hominem* argumentation, which is judging the arguments with reference to the person making them. We might excuse Nagarjuna as a sloppy thinker, but it is evident that he has

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logical capabilities, so we must infer deceit. Occasional errors of logic are human – but such systematic misuse or selective use of logic is monstrous. He evidently takes people for fools, who will swallow whatever he dishes out. Worse still, he does not fear to intellectually incapacitate generations and generations of young people. Philosophy is a responsibility, like the medical profession. It should be an attempt to increase the mental health and efficacy of one's fellow humans, not a pastime for dilettantes or jokers or a cruel con game.

All this makes one wonder whether Nagarjuna himself achieved the supreme consciousness he attempts to guide us towards. If he is already enlightened, where are the honesty and sincerity, the realism and healthiness, the compassion and loving-kindness, one would expect from such consciousness? If he is not yet enlightened, how can he claim firsthand knowledge that abandoning logic is the way to such consciousness? In the latter case, he would have done better to stick to meditation, rather than speak out prematurely.

The overall result of his philosophical action (at least, those aspects of it we have encountered here) is, counterproductively, to cast doubt on Buddhism itself. For if

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one respected figure claiming, or being claimed, to have achieved enlightenment is uncertain to have done so, why not the others? But, as with all hearsay evidence on esoteric claims, Buddhists have to rely on faith, anyway. Also, fortunately, Buddhism is a lot richer, has much more going for it, than the few philosophical ideas and arguments treated in the present essay.

And presumably the same can be said for Nagarjuna (I have not read all his work). If we view his arguments as serious logical discourse, we are bound to condemn him as above done. But perhaps we should view it all more generously as a guru's tongue-in-cheek mimicry of logical discourse, intended purely as a *koan* for logically minded persons (like me) to mull over and go beyond. In that case, it is not the content of the discourse which counts for him, but its psychological effect. He wants us to 'die' of laughter.

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The **Heart Sutra** states: *form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. And the same is true for sensation, perception, conception and consciousness.*

Hakuin comments: "Striking aside waves to look for water when the waves *are* water! Forms don't hinder emptiness; emptiness is the tissue of form. Emptiness isn't destruction of form; form is the flesh of emptiness… Form and emptiness are not-two. If you pass these strange apparitions without alarm, they self-destruct. Forms sensation perception conception are sparks in the eye."[108]

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[108] *Zen Words for the Heart*, translated in by Norman Waddell (Shambhala: Boston, Mass., 1996). "The *Heart Sutra* was probably composed in India about 1500 years ago", which means a few hundred years after Nagarjuna. The commentary is by Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1768), a Japanese Zen master.

Appendix 1: Fallacies in Nagarjuna's work.

The following are the main fallacies that I have found Nagarjuna committing in his philosophical treatment of "emptiness".

A. Fallacy of the Tetralemma.

This consists in treating the combinations "both A and non-A" (contradiction) and "neither A nor non-A" (inclusion of the middle) as formal possibilities. But these are in all cases (i.e. whatever "A" stands for) logically forbidden at the outset.

B. Fallacy of the Inconclusive Dilemma.

This consists in making a dilemma appear conclusive, when in fact one (or all) of its horns (major premises) is (or are) problematic rather than assertoric. Dilemmatic argument can be validated only when its major premises are all proper if-then statements, not when any of them is an "if – maybe-then" statement.

C. Fallacy of the Denial of One and All.

This consists in denying one theory about some issue, and making it seem as if one has thus denied all possible theories about it. The denial, to be thorough, must indeed consider all alternative theories before drawing such negative conclusion about the issue.

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D. Fallacy of the Ungranted Premise.

This consists in taking for granted a premise which is not generally accepted and which has not been adequately supported, or indeed which is generally unaccepted or which has been convincingly refuted.

E. Fallacy of the Unclear Theory or Term.

This consists in glossing over relevant details or nuances, which make all the difference in the understanding of the term or theory concerned. A term or theory should be defined and made precise so far as possible in the context of knowledge concerned, so that relative propositions can be properly tested.

F. Fallacy of Equivocation.

This consists in using a single term in two (or more) different senses within one's thesis, so as to make it seem that what has been established in relation to one of the senses has been established in relation to the other(s). This is made possible by fuzziness in definition of terms.

G. Fallacy of the Concept Doubting Percept.

This consists in using a concept to put in doubt the very percept(s) which has (or have) given rise to it in the first place. The order of things, i.e. the genesis of the concept in knowledge, how it arises in relation to certain percepts, must always be acknowledged and respected.

H. Fallacy of the Inappropriate Fixation.

This consists in pretending that a term that has intrinsically variable meaning has fixed meaning. Notably, terms like "this", "here" or "now" are

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intrinsically variable, in that the same word is always used, even as the actual object, time or place referred to differs; such terms do not remain stuck to their referents once and for all.

I. Fallacy of the Double Standard.

This consists in being severe towards one's opponent's argument while being lenient with regard to one's own argument, although the two arguments are formally similar or have similar strengths and/or weaknesses.

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Appendix 2: Brief glossary of some basic concepts.

Chögyam Trungpa (1940-1987), a modern philosopher of Tibetan Buddhism, popular in the West, wrote that Nagarjuna "much preferred to approach truth by taking the arguments of other philosophical schools on their own terms and logically reducing them *ad absurdum*, rather than himself offering any definitions of reality."[109] We have seen in the present essay that such claims to logic by Madhyamika philosophy are highly pretentious.

Of *Shunyata*, the same disciple of Nagarjuna has this to say: "we impose our preconceptions, our ideas, our version of things onto phenomena, instead of seeing things as they are. Once we are able to see through our veil of preconception, we realize that it is an unnecessary and confused way of attaching handles to experiences without considering whether the handles fit or not."[110] This view, that conceptualization imposes something artificial and distortive on direct perception, may seem superficially credible, but upon reflection it is based on confusions. There are two aspects involved.

The first aspect is *psychological* – the fact of distraction. It is evident during meditation that extraneous thoughts keep popping up against our will, like a sort of enervating

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109 *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Boston, Ma.: Shambhala, 1973. (P. 191.)

110 *Op. cit.* (P. 207)

background noise. The brain continuously offers the mind topics of conversation, spontaneously or by association. We may with effort ignore them, but eventually one may grab our attention and drag us through a long interlude of useless images and inner sounds, memories, anticipations, discourse and emotions. Such “thoughts” obstruct our attempts at concentration, although if we persevere in our meditation they dampen and eventually disappear. During ordinary observation or thinking, too, there is a similar interference of irrelevant reflections, which hinder cognitive efficiency and efficacy. But *it does not follow* that cognition is thereby incapacitated.

Another aspect of Trungpa’s statement is *epistemological* – the fact of fallibility. Human thought is admittedly not automatically and always correct in its observations, conceptualizations, categorizations and verbalizations, predications and generalizations, argumentations and other rational processes in pursuit of knowledge. However, *it does not follow* that thought is automatically and always wrong! Indeed, one could not make such a generalization without thereby denying one’s own skeptical claim; so one must admit some efficacy to rational cognition, including the ability to spot one’s own errors.

What our study of Nagarjuna’s arguments has clearly shown is that his rejection of human reason is not based on any profound understanding of the processes involved in it. Rather, *his* personal failure to carefully observe and reflect on the actual genesis in human knowledge of the concepts he criticizes made them seem arbitrary *to him*. But although we all often err in our thinking, and few of us take time or have the intelligence to analyze its founding concepts, it does not

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follow that these concepts are invalid and useless, and that they can or should be abandoned.

Let us here very briefly recall what we said about some of these basic concepts in the present work. The reader can then see clearly that these concepts are not "preconceptions" that throw a "veil" over the percepts they are based on, but merely attempts to summarize information, so that more and more of it can be taken into consideration in any judgment, be it verbal or not. They are not "unnecessary and confused… handles", applied without regard to whether they "fit or not", but legitimate tools of knowledge, which like all tools have to be properly used to do their job. Human knowledge is not built on a purely deductive model or by arbitrary imposition, as Trungpa's (and Nagarjuna's) skeptical statements imply, but is an inductive development from experience.

- **Motion, rest**. The *facts* of motion (in the broad sense of change) and rest (constancy) are given in experience, found both within present phenomena and in the comparison and contrast between present and remembered phenomena. The *concepts* of motion and rest are developed in opposition to each other, with reference to such experiences.

- **Entity, individual**. Comparing and contrasting our memories of successive moments in the stream of phenomena appearing before us, we observe that some aspects seem different and some seem the same. From such experiences (assuming 'memory' and 'time') we infer the existence of 'change' and the existence of 'substrata' to change (or individual entities). The inference involved is adductive, i.e. hypothesis, logical prediction and continued confirmation in experience.

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- **Essence, kind**. Comparing and contrasting two or more such entities, we observe that some seem to have certain characteristics in common and exclusively (statistical *sine qua non*). A characteristic apparently common to two or more phenomena (concretes) is called an abstraction, being a presumed unity (of measure) in plurality (of instances). When (or so long as) such an abstraction is found distinctive, it is called an essence (or essential characteristic) and it can be used for purposes of definition. Individuals with the same essence are said to belong to the same kind or class.
- **Naming, verbalization**. Phenomena are first referred to in discourse by pointing and saying 'this' (or 'here' or 'now' or the like) to include, and 'but not that' (or 'there' or 'then' or the like) to exclude. Entities and kinds, concepts derived from collections of similar and distinct phenomena, may be associated with (respectively proper or common) words for the purposes of memory and discourse. Verbalization need not be final, but may be adapted as required; i.e. what is included or excluded under a name is flexible, provided consistency is maintained.
- **Nature**. The nature (or identity) of some individual or kind is the sum of the (categorical or conditional) 'laws' exhibited by it, i.e. a generalization of the apparent regularities in its attributes and behaviors, subject to review and particularization if new appearances do not match the old. Attributes or behaviors which seem devoid of law in this sense are regarded as either personal events or happenstance.

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- **Predication**. Predication may be particular or general, possible or necessary, categorical or conditional, inclusion or exclusion of one phenomenon or abstract appearance in some abstraction. This may mentally occur with or without words. In any case, predication is a tentative act, a proposition, subject to checks and balances suggested by inductive and deductive logic. It has no dogmatic finality, but is controlled with reference to experience and reason.
- **Causation**. This refers to certain regularities of relation between two or more phenomena or abstractions, say 'A' and 'B'. The most typical is constant conjunction between A and B, but the term is also applicable to negative cases (not-A and not-B, A and not-B, not-A and B). There are also many degrees of causation, according to the number of factors involved. Causation is thus a statistical concept, intended to record and communicate certain observations. It is one of a larger constellation of causal concepts, including volition and influence, as well as spontaneity or chance.
- **Self, soul**. The Subject of consciousness and Agent of will, presumed to inhabit humans (and other entities, like higher animals or God). That this special core substance (spirit) is presumed (induced rather than deduced) does not necessarily mean that it is invented. To induce it we refer to phenomena experienced, conceptual considerations and possibly direct personal intuitions of self. Although no single item is definite proof of soul, a large number of indices may suggest its existence.

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All these works may be consulted on the Internet, at
www.TheLogician.net

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111 First published by author in Vancouver, B.C., 1990.
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114 First published by author in Geneva, 1999. The first edition comprised only Phase I (Macroanalysis), whereas this edition also includes Phase II (Microanalysis).
115 First published by author in Geneva, earlier 2005.
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BUDDHIST ILLOGIC: A Critical Analysis of Nagarjuna's Arguments

The 2nd Century CE Indian philosopher Nagarjuna founded the Madhyamika (Middle Way) school of Mahayana Buddhism, which strongly influenced Chinese (Ch'an), Korean (Sôn) and Japanese (Zen) Buddhism, as well as Tibetan Buddhism. Nagarjuna is regarded by many Buddhist writers to this day as a very important philosopher, who they claim definitively proved the futility of ordinary human cognitive means.

His writings include a series of arguments purporting to show the illogic of logic, the absurdity of reason. He considers this the way to verbalize and justify the Buddhist doctrine of "emptiness" (Shunyata). These arguments attack some of the basic tenets and techniques of reasoning, such as the laws of thought (identity, non-contradiction and the excluded middle), conceptualization and predication, our common assumptions of self, entities and essences, as well as our beliefs in motion and causation.

The present essay demonstrates the many sophistries involved in Nagarjuna's arguments.

Although a critique of the Madhyamika philosophical interpretation and defense of "emptiness", Buddhist Illogic is not intended to dissuade readers from Buddhism. On the contrary, its aim is to enhance personal awareness of actual cognitive processes, and so improve meditation. It is also an excellent primer on phenomenological epistemology.

Avi Sion is the author of several works on logic and philosophy: Future Logic (1990); Judaic Logic (1995); Buddhist Illogic (2002); Phenomenology (2003); The Logic of Causation (1999, 2003); Volition and Allied Causal Concepts (2004); Ruminations (2005); Meditations (2006); Logical and Spiritual Reflections (2008). These works can be freely studied at: www.TheLogician.net.

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